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# An Evaluation of Illinois Middle School Civics Implementation Progress

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This research was conducted, and the report was produced, by the [Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement \(CIRCLE\)](#), part of the Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life at Tufts University.

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# Table of Contents

- Executive Summary ..... 2**
  - Middle-school Civics in Illinois is Making Strong Progress; Continued Efforts and Investments Needed to Address Gaps..... 3
  - Themes and Future Direction ..... 5
- Background - Civic Learning in the Land of Lincoln..... 6**
  - Ecosystem of Support for Middle School Civics Implementation ..... 9
- Purpose and Outline of this Report ..... 10**
  - Overview of Methodology ..... 10
- Section 1: Fidelity of Civics Instruction in Illinois Middle Schools ..... 11**
- Section 2: Barriers and Opportunities for High Quality Civics Instruction .....26**
- Section 3: Connections between Student Experience and Civic Competency ..... 31**
- Synthesis and Implications for Future Practice and Research.....36**
  - Directions for Future Research..... 38
- Recommendations and Resources.....38**
  - Recommendations For Schools ..... 39
  - Recommendations For Classroom Educators..... 41
- Conclusion and Acknowledgments..... 42**
- References..... 44**
- Appendix ..... 47**
  - Study Design ..... 47
  - Constructs, Questions, and Variables..... 48

# Executive Summary

Civic Learning in the Land of Lincoln aims to prepare students for civic life by creating opportunities for establishing a strong foundational knowledge base, engaging them in simulated and real processes of democracy, and developing students’ capacity to form and answer important civic inquiries. The ultimate goal is to help them become informed citizens who make a positive impact on their community now and in the future. To realize this vision, Illinois’ multi-sector learning and funding partners, along with districts and middle schools, have invested considerable efforts and resources to improve civic learning.

In this report, we detail CIRCLE’s assessment of the status of civic learning in Illinois middle schools as Public Act 101-0254, a key piece of Illinois Middle School Civics mandates, came into effect in the 2020-2021 school year.

This law signed by Governor JB Pritzker in 2019 mandates a similar set of practices and a semester’s worth of civics instruction by the end of middle school. Implementation design of the middle-school law was different in multiple ways; both because of other frameworks and mandates that have been in effect, and because of the different stakeholders involved: middle school educators and their students. We describe which considerations went into the design of the “middle-school civics law” implementation in Table 1.

**Table 1: Components of Civic Learning Mandates in Illinois Middle Schools**

Policy Name and Description
<p><a href="#">Public Act 101-0254</a>: mandates a semester’s worth of civics instruction within grade 6, 7, or 8.</p> <p>The <a href="#">Illinois State Board of Education Mandate Guidance</a> noted that “a district may embed a semester of civics in one or more grade level” and that implementation was to begin in the 2020-2021 school year.</p> <p>ISBE guidance further specified four components of instruction: “government institutions,” “discussion of current and societal issues,” “service learning,” and “simulations of democratic processes.”</p> <p>In its graduation requirement guidance, ISBE states: “School districts are free to determine how to incorporate civics education into their current curricula in a way that best meets the needs of their students.”</p> <p>“All social science courses should strive to incorporate inquiry skills simultaneously with disciplinary concepts. Cross-curricular integration is highly encouraged in all courses. For example, civics coursework would include civics standards as well as any other applicable standards from the other areas of the disciplinary concepts.”</p>
<p><a href="#">IL Social Science Standards</a></p> <p>Began implementation in the 2017-2018 school year. The K-12 social science standards are grounded in inquiry, which ISBE defines as: “an ongoing cycle of learning to use knowledge at increasingly complex levels as a way to integrate content.” For grades 6 to 8, ISBE provides guidance by complexity level for each content to help local districts determine when and how to teach content standards.</p>
<p><a href="#">HB376</a>: “Beginning with the 2022-2023 school year, every public elementary school and high school will be required to include a unit of instruction studying the events of Asian American History, including the history of Asian Americans in Illinois and the Midwest.”</p>
<p><a href="#">Public Act 101-0227</a>: “Amends School Code...Provides that textbooks purchased with grant funds must be non-discriminatory. Provides that in public schools only, the teaching of history of the United States shall include a study of the roles and contributions of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people in the history of this country and this State.” Effective July 1, 2020.</p>

# Middle-school Civics in Illinois is Making Strong Progress; Continued Efforts and Investments Needed to Address Gaps

The data from this two-year evaluation suggest that educators are making meaningful progress in implementing the middle-school civics mandate with fidelity. Below, we summarize findings and recommendations.

**Table 2: Takeaways and Recommendation Summary**

Topic	Key Takeaways	Recommendations for Schools and Administrators	Recommendations for Teachers
Instructional Practices	Content coverage and service-learning are widely implemented, with room for growth in quality.	Build and sustain strong school-community partnerships.  Assess and strengthen opportunities for civic growth especially for student voice through a schoolwide framework for civic learning like Illinois Democracy Schools.	Strive to integrate more student voice and collaborative decision-making in service-learning. Integrate more peer-led inquiry into content instruction.
	Current and societal issue discussions are happening, but without much student input/voice.	Create a safe and inclusive environment for both teachers and students to explore current and societal issues in the classroom.  Embrace the value of issue discussion and engagement, and support teachers in navigating pushback from parents when it comes to discussing current events and social issues.	Include more peer-to-peer interaction and student voice in current issue discussions and receive grade-appropriate resources that consider students’ developmental levels to have complex issue discussions.
	Newer and potentially controversial topics like LGBT and AAPI history have yet to be widely implemented	Increase awareness about these newer mandates, and proactively communicate with families and community stakeholders about the new requirements.	Teachers may need more support, including both instructional resources and explicit encouragement from administrators, to teach these content areas.
	The mandate for “Inquiry as a mode of learning” is valued as an opportunity to help students develop transferable skills like critical thinking.	Continue to support inquiry-based learning by providing time and resources for teachers to develop relevant instruction strategies across content, disciplines, and pedagogies.	Learn about various ways in which inquiry can be introduced to students at various grade and achievement levels to ensure every student has access to deep inquiry.
	Civic learning in middle school is happening across the curriculum and students have similar experiences with civic instruction in and outside of social studies. Students report extracurricular activities provide an important pathway for developing civic skills and knowledge.	Provide encouragement and opportunities for cross-discipline teams to collaborate and develop interdisciplinary units.  Take an active role in conveying how civic learning complements ELA, Media/Library, and STEM education without adding more units and time in the school.	Look for opportunities to point out connections between ELA and STEM topics and civic learning to synergize multiple standards.

Barriers and Opportunities	Marginalization of civic learning in schools affects resources and time spent on civics, and subsequently capacity to teach it.	<p>Reinvigorate the civic mission of school by assembling a committee to assess and strengthen civic development opportunities and become an Illinois Democracy School.</p> <p>Develop and teach strategies to model democratic practices and leverage various student engagement opportunities to include civic goals.</p>	Collaborate with administrators, students and community members to activate the school’s civic mission. Illinois Democracy Schools offers a framework to start this process.
	Even though civic learning is generally supported, teachers often struggle with pushback from parents and families who may have concerns about the civics curriculum	<p>Support teachers in navigating pushback from parents when it comes to discussing current events and social issues. Clearly communicate the mandates to the community, along with educational values fostered by this pedagogy.</p> <p>Establish and adopt a clear framework for the school/district’s approach to civic education. Consider adopting Illinois Democracy School’s framework to articulate a holistic approach for developing civic capacity.</p>	<p>Seek support from administrators to develop communication materials ahead of the school year.</p> <p>Join learning communities where peers can mentor one another to navigate complex situations in real time.</p>
	In-service teacher training improves teachers’ capacity to use prescribed pedagogy.	Encourage educators to leverage various in-service training opportunities in civics and provide substitutes, when possible, to encourage participation.	Engage in continued learning by enrolling in professional development courses, on-demand training, and professional learning communities.
Student Outcomes	High quality civic learning experience, defined as pedagogy and instructional content aligned with Illinois standards and mandates, is positively correlated with civic efficacy, civic responsibility, community connection, and civic engagement. Service-learning, positive school climate, and student voice were among the strongest predictors of civic competencies.	<p>Develop and sustain strong partnerships with community and local governmental organizations to create meaningful opportunities for community engagement among students.</p> <p>Offer holistic and diverse ways to connect with civic life through curriculum, school climate, and extracurricular activities. The Illinois Democracy Schools program offers a framework that includes data tracking to enable this work.</p>	<p>Further develop extracurricular activities and service-learning units so that students have more opportunities for student voice.</p> <p>Continue to offer strong instruction on foundational content in social studies so that students are able to fluently apply their content knowledge to real-world situations.</p>

## Themes and Future Direction

Our findings suggest that a majority of students are being exposed to a variety of evidence-supported practices as required by the suite of social studies mandates and standards in Illinois. For each pedagogy, the “breadth” of implementation seems to be advancing more quickly than its “depth,” which is to be expected given that Illinois mandates came into effect in the 2020-2021 school year as schools were just starting to understand and recover from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Though our evaluation explored many questions, some cross-cutting themes and takeaways appeared in multiple areas of our investigation:

1. Incorporating opportunities for student voice seems to have broad benefits for students’ civic readiness, and there are ways to integrate student voice across the curriculum and in extracurricular activities. However, with adults making most decisions in schools, these opportunities are often missed.
2. Students who experience more prescribed pedagogies and comprehensive content instruction also perceive a positive school climate, which, in turn is correlated with civic outcomes for students.
3. Local political context and the community’s reaction to social studies education impact educators’ capacity to teach civics with fidelity and across the curriculum. Because civics continues to be marginalized in the curriculum despite these mandates and standards, teachers need explicit support and protection from administrators as well as resources and time to spend on civics.
4. In-service teacher training benefits a vast majority of middle school educators who are now enrolling in the Guardians of Democracy online courses to strengthen their own content knowledge and skills for inquiry-based learning.
5. Students from different backgrounds differ somewhat on the amount and quality of civic learning pedagogies to which they have had access. In our study, white students and those who are enrolled in a suburban school were more likely to have access to more prescribed pedagogies.
6. Overall, civic learning helps students connect with their community, develop a sense of personal responsibility to contribute to their community, and engage in their community. While the difference in civic outcomes is less prominent than for civic learning pedagogies, disparities in civic outcomes remain, and family socialization of civic attitudes and engagement continue to predict students’ civic competencies.
7. While there may be concerns that civic education in Illinois could be forcing students to engage in “politics” (in addition to or instead of gaining foundational knowledge and competency for active and engaged citizenship) findings clearly suggest that 8<sup>th</sup> graders, regardless of how much civics they get or what kind of pedagogy they are exposed to, rarely “discuss politics” on their own. As intended by the mandates, inquiries and discussions about societal and current issues seem to be happening within the structured curriculum without influencing middle schooler’s tendency to “talk politics.”
8. We find that, when students receive strong civics instruction, they are more efficacious and more likely to engage in civic life—largely through service and informal help offered to others in need. Some (but fewer) students engage in formal processes of American constitutional democracy such as supporting eligible adults to register to vote and participating in peaceful marches and demonstrations.

## Background - Civic Learning in the Land of Lincoln

The value of civic education in K-12 schools has rarely been as simultaneously critical and contested as it is today. On one hand, experts and the news media decry the decline in students' performance in the American History and Civics NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2023), as well as disparities among student populations, and rally together for better and more social studies and civic education (CIRCLE, 2023; Kelly, 2023; Mahnken, 2023). On the other hand, public discourse about what content and methods should be used to prepare future generations of Americans has been complicated and highly variable from state to state, with some implementing book bans, others altering long-standing social studies content standards and course curricula, and still others discouraging if not an outright banning civics pedagogy like engaging students directly in student-led policy advocacy initiatives.

At the heart of this public debate is a question of whether students should actively engage with authentic civic experiences while they are in school or if they should wait until they are much older and out of school, as well as a deeply held suspicion that educators are attempting to "politicize" young minds. Because of this debate, educators who convey civic virtues and teach U.S. History and Civics are also under pressure in many communities, regardless of state policies (Rogers et al., 2022). According to a recent study, a large number of educators in public education are leaving the profession (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023; Choi, 2023) and teacher morale continues to hover at a historic low: just one in five teachers express a high level of job satisfaction and more than a third report that they are considering leaving their teaching job (Merrimack College, 2023).

Ten years ago, a CIRCLE-staffed commission composed of renowned scholars and practitioners produced a set of recommendations to strengthen civic knowledge and competency among young Americans. One of the recommendations was to implement standards and policies that protect and enable teachers to use best practices and engage students in current and even controversial topics that affect American society (Commission on Youth Voting and Civic Knowledge, 2013). In the context of the above challenges to civic education, that vision and those recommendations are needed more than ever.

Illinois has been an innovative force for state-wide civic education policy reform and implementation design. The state has a proud history of grassroots, multi-sector movements to support civic education dating at least as far back as 2004<sup>1</sup> when the Robert R. McCormick Foundation and the Constitutional Rights Foundation of Chicago led the way in building a community-wide consensus on priorities for civic education through the Illinois Civics Mission Coalition (ICMC) which issued a blueprint following the publication of the *Civic Mission of School* report (CIRCLE and Carnegie Corporation of New York, 2003; Gould, et al., 2011). The CMS report reflected the consensus of the experts at the time, and provided a foundation to ICMC's advocacy agenda.

The Illinois Civic Movement persisted and continued to gain momentum until 2015, when then-Governor Bruce Rauner signed the Act 99-0434 and subsequently Act 099-0485. These laws laid out a new set of mandates for civic education including a high-school level, semester-long course in civics, as well as use of three additional evidence-based practices: current and societal issue discussion, simulation of democratic processes, and service-learning through informed action. Act 99-0434 was put into effect starting with the incoming class of 2020, and CIRCLE evaluated the impact of the implementation period (2016-2019) in a previous report (Hayat & Kawahima-Ginsberg, 2020)

This report focuses on the newest law signed by Governor JB Pritzker in 2019, Public Act 101-0254, and its related mandates. The law requires a semester's worth of civics instruction by the end of middle school and a similar set of practices to the high school Civics mandate passed in 2015 through Public Act 99-0434. However, some notable differences were taken into consideration in designing the implementation of Public Act 101-0254 and other middle-school mandates. We describe the considerations that influenced the design of the "middle-

school civics mandates” implementation in Table 3.

Arguably, the momentum gained from the successful roll-out of the Illinois civics mandates in high school made it possible to introduce a set of mandates and a renewed motivation to strengthen civic learning in middle school. At the same time, implementing all of the new mandates and social science standards can seem overwhelming teachers, especially because they were put into place right before and after the COVID-19 pandemic began. As a response to this law, there have been meaningful investments in civics instruction for Illinois’ middle school classroom teachers and administrators in the three years since the passing of Public Act 101-0254. These investments were made by many nonprofit educational organizations, district administrators who adopted the new mandates voluntarily, and through the support from the Robert R. McCormick Foundation. The latter provided funding for capacity-building and educator training support through the Illinois Civics Hub, hosted by the DuPage County Regional Office of Education, including numerous free resources and courses as well as fee-for-service training. Later in the report, we will provide an overview of the Illinois “ecosystems” for educator capacity support for middle schools.

While Illinois continues to be a national leader in holistic civic learning and educator capacity support, no mandate is implemented immediately, broadly, or perfectly without considerable efforts and investments. Illinois’s mandate is no exception, and efforts there have been complicated by a number of factors. This report’s findings should be interpreted with consideration of these factors which, in sum, were outside of educators’ immediate control that ultimately delayed the start of full implementation efforts across the board.

First: middle-school civics implementation began in the year the COVID-19 pandemic began, which has had dire consequences for the education system and students. Second, the implementation mechanism of the “middle-school law” was originally unclear—unlike the high school law which clearly indicated that high school students must take one or more semester-long civics courses to graduate. The Illinois State Board of Education later issued guidance stating that a “a district may embed a semester of civics in one or more grade level” and that implementation was to begin in the 2020-2021 school year. Although the guidance was issued by late 2019, the districts likely did not have a chance to fully audit their middle school civics instruction until much later, using tools like that offered through Illinois Civics Hub (Berkman, 2021). A separate study conducted in Massachusetts shortly after its social studies framework revision during the COVID-19 pandemic suggested that social studies instruction was often paused in order to address student safety as well as foundational and tested subjects (English Language Arts, Math and Science in Massachusetts (Tichnor-Wagoner, Kawashima-Ginsberg & Hayat, 2020).

As a result, the passage of PA 101-0254 in 2019 and the COVID-19 pandemic starting in 2020 meant that middle schools likely did not get to plan out how their schools would abide by this new law, alongside existing social science standards and additional content-based mandates, until the 2021-2022 or even 2022-2023 academic years. As such, this report should be viewed as a status report from districts and schools that are just starting to regain their footing in civics instruction, rather than a conclusive report on the full implementation of the Illinois civics mandates.



**Table 3: Mandates, Frameworks and Resources Considered in Design of the Middle School Civics Implementation**

Policy Name and Description	How It Affects Implementation
<p><b>Public Act 101-0254:</b> mandates a semester’s worth of civics instruction within grade 6, 7, or 8.</p>	<p>All public middle schools are required to teach civics.</p>
<p><b>Illinois State Board of Education Mandate Guidance:</b> Noted that “a district may embed a semester of civics in one or more grade level” and that implementation was to begin in the 2020-2021 school year.</p> <p>ISBE guidance further specified four components of instruction: “government institutions,” “discussion of current and societal issues,” “service learning,” and “simulations of democratic processes.”</p> <p>In its graduation requirement guidance, ISBE states: “School districts are free to determine how to incorporate civics education into their current curricula in a way that best meets the needs of their students.”</p> <p>“All social science courses should strive to incorporate inquiry skills simultaneously with disciplinary concepts. Cross-curricular integration is highly encouraged in all courses. For example, civics coursework would include civics standards as well as any other applicable standards from the other areas of the disciplinary concepts.”</p>	<p>Middle school educators who provide civics instruction could come from multiple grades and disciplines.</p> <p>Educator needs and assets are likely to be more diverse in middle school civics implementation than high school (in which the main target population was high school Civics/Government course instructors)</p> <p>Teachers were asked to use the following evidence-supported pedagogies: “government institutions,” “discussion of current and societal issues,” “service learning,” and “simulations of democratic processes,” where no such practice guidance existed before PL 101-0254.</p> <p>Inquiry is used as the mode of learning—as Illinois’ current social science standards have always done. But the civics content can and should be taught across the curriculum, through inquiry, and by connecting concepts across disciplines.</p>
<p><b>IL Social Science Standards:</b> Began implementation in the 2017-2018 school year. The K-12 social science standards are grounded in inquiry, which ISBE defines as: “an ongoing cycle of learning to use knowledge at increasingly complex levels as a way to integrate content.” For grades 6 to 8, ISBE provides guidance by complexity level for each content to help local districts determine when and how to teach content standards.</p>	<p>Inquiry serves as the primary mode of instruction, supported by the evidence-based instructional practices described in Public Act 101-0254.</p> <p>Standards also include media literacy standards. ISBE defines media literacy as “the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, create, and communicate using a variety of objective forms, including, but not limited to, print, visual, audio, interactive, and digital texts.” Explicit connections to inquiry and informed action are made in the guidance.</p>
<p><b>HB376:</b> “Beginning with the 2022-2023 school year, every public elementary school and high school will be required to include a unit of instruction studying the events of Asian American History, including the history of Asian Americans in Illinois and the Midwest.”</p>	<p>Created additional content to include in social studies instruction. Specifically, HB376 specifies that the curriculum should include:</p> <p>The contributions of Asian Americans toward advancing civil rights from the 19th century onward The contributions made by individual Asian Americans in government, arts, humanities, and sciences</p> <p>The contributions of Asian American communities to the economic, cultural, social, and political development of the United States.</p>

[Public Act 101-0227](#): “Amends School Code...Provides that textbooks purchased with grant funds must be non-discriminatory. Provides that in public schools only, the teaching of history of the United States shall include a study of the roles and contributions of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people in the history of this country and this State.” Effective July 1, 2020.”

Created additional content to include in social studies instruction as part of the middle-school graduation requirement. This mandate applies to public schools only.

## Ecosystem of Support for Middle School Civics Implementation

### FUNDING

The Robert R. McCormick Foundation proposes a three-year, \$3 million plan (\$1 million annually) to help middle school teachers, schools, and districts incorporate a civics course in grades 6, 7, or 8 (Illinois Civics Hub, n.d.). This funding supports development and implementation of online courses through multiple channels and pathways, as described briefly below. John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation provides additional funding support.

### CAPACITY-BUILDING

Ongoing [teacher professional development](#) opportunities are disseminated widely to over 2,000 educators through Illinois Civics Hub’s newsletter and social media. Professional development opportunities are developed by ICH staff as well as many professional learning partners across the state and the U.S. Together, the Hub is able to offer expert-led training on a wide range of topics and grades. Training opportunities are also offered to pre-service teachers through partnerships with the Golden Apple program and regional schools of education.

Training opportunities are often tailored to the specific needs of the educators in Illinois. For instance, an introductory workshop on teaching about Asian American experiences is offered for K-5 grade educators and for 6-12 grade educators to help educators meet HB376 with fidelity.

Training opportunities are offered both in person and online through the Guardian of Democracy Teachers courses and webinars, many of which are archived and accessible to the public. Finally, Illinois Civics Hub uses a proven strategy that worked in its high school implementation support by recruiting regional Civics Instructional Coaches to train educators in each school and/or district serving students in grades 6-8.

### RESOURCES

Monthly newsletters published by Illinois Civics Hub provide myriad other professional learning opportunities and student engagement events representative of the statewide (and nationwide) partnerships that the Hub has built over the years to support civic learning holistically. The newsletter also works to create a climate for community learning for educators by highlighting teachers’ real-world instruction experience and student voice.

In addition to training, ICH also produces many tools, often through collaboration with practicing teachers, to help localize and concretize the mandates and standards from the state. Examples include a [course audit tool](#) and a [deconstructed civics mandate tool](#), which breaks down the Illinois Social Science Standards for middle school grades into “I can” statements at different levels of complexity and depth that teachers can use to design differentiated instruction.

All told, Illinois Civics Hub has provided training to thousands of teachers. According to the latest enrollment records for the Guardian of Democracy Teachers courses, an increasing portion of educators are middle-school

and non-social-studies educators, Of the 276 Illinois educators who received one or more microcredentials for Civics instruction, an estimated 60 teachers (28%) teach middle school grades, with virtually all of them enrolling in the course after the middle school mandate implementation year began.<sup>1</sup> This increase in course enrollment by middle school teachers is one of the indicators that they are increasingly aware of the shift in expectations for instruction and asking for training.

## Purpose and Outline of this Report

The main purpose of this report is to assess the progress of the Illinois middle school civics law and standards implementation, including Public Act 101-0254, ISBE Social Science Standards, and new content mandates on Asian American history and the contributions of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people. This combination of Public Acts, standards, and implementation guidance by Illinois State Board of Education drove our evaluation questions. The report is organized by the key question in the following sections:

- Section 1:** Are teachers able to teach civics across the curriculum using the prescribed pedagogy and content standards as reported by educators and students? How do students perceive the prescribed pedagogies in the Illinois mandate?
- Section 2:** Which factors seem to be related to high-fidelity instruction? What might be hindering it?
- Section 3:** Do students who received greater amount and/or quality of civics instruction demonstrate higher level of engagement with civic life?

We report findings relevant to each of these queries and make recommendations for improving the quality and equity of implementation. When possible, we make evidence-based recommendations specific to key stakeholders in Illinois civics implementation, such as school and district administrators, classroom teachers, and students.

## Overview of Methodology

This 24-month evaluation took place across the 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 school years and employed a simultaneous mixed-methods design involving data collected from a variety of sources including students, teachers, and other school personnel. Quantitative data in this evaluation draws from surveys of teachers and students designed to illuminate students' civic learning experiences throughout their middle school years and the pedagogical strategies teachers used to convey civic content and practices. Qualitative data, which served to more deeply explore and illuminate findings from the surveys, comes from teacher interviews and student focus groups. In these settings we asked deeper questions about the experiences and preferences of students, and the challenges and opportunities teachers reported in implementing civics education in the middle grades.

Additionally, we incorporate findings from the Guardians of Democracy (GoD) teachers program of the Illinois Civics Hub. Prior research evaluating the GoD pilot found promising evidence of the program's ability to shift teacher dispositions related to civics pedagogy (Gould et al., 2011). As the Illinois middle school mandate came into effect, more middle-school educators have enrolled into the Guardian of Democracy Teachers program than in previous years, and teachers participating in the study were offered the opportunity to participate in GoD as part of their engagement with the study. We share a quantitative summary of teacher progress as well as some qualitative evidence from GoD teacher surveys and learning portfolios to complement the main evaluation

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<sup>1</sup> 60 is a somewhat conservative estimate, as some districts in IL combine junior high school and senior high school. When teachers identified as part of such a school, we did not count them as middle-school teachers.

findings. While this report includes data from 8<sup>th</sup> grade students in both Spring 2022 and 2023, the 2023 data included an additional third school that was not able to join the study prior to the end of the 2021-2022 school year. As such, it is not possible to directly compare data from 2022 and 2023 without excluding those students, and shifts from one year to the next should not necessarily be viewed as trends.

For more detailed information about the methodology, see the Study Design section of the appendix.

## Section 1: Fidelity of Civics Instruction in Illinois Middle Schools

The first section of this report explores the extent to which teachers are implementing civics instruction in middle schools in keeping with laws and regulations, standards, and guidance by the Illinois State Board of Education. To this end, we explore the extent to which students report access to the core pedagogical practices laid out in ISBE implementation guidance and content (“government institutions,” “discussion of current and societal issues,” “service learning,” and “simulations of democratic processes”) and whether they receive instruction related to the new content mandates on Asian American History and the roles and contributions of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people in history. Next, we turn to inquiry as a mode of learning, including media literacy education. Then we consider whether civic learning is taking place broadly across disciplines in middle schools, and finally we explore differences between teachers’ reported instruction and intentions and the experiences students report remembering or taking away from their middle school years.

### Method

Data in this section is drawn from student and teacher surveys conducted in the Spring of 2023, as well as qualitative data from interviews and focus groups in the months immediately prior to fielding the survey. We analyzed individual items from each of these scales to look for patterns in student responses and identify areas of particular strength or where there is room for improvement in current implementation practices.

This section of the report is organized around the following research questions:

#### **Q1: To what extent are middle school teachers in IL able to provide civic learning across the curriculum?**

- Q1a: How are teachers able to use the prescribed pedagogies in the IL mandate?
- Q1b: How are teachers able to use inquiry as a mode of learning about civics content?
- Q1c: When, where, and how much is civic learning occurring across the middle school course and sequence? How is civic learning valued by other teachers and administrators?

### Findings

#### **Q1a: How are teachers able to use the prescribed pedagogies in IL mandate?**

Here we describe the current state of implementation in terms of four core pedagogical constructs: 1) Foundational Civic Knowledge related to government institutions and other content mandates, especially Asian American and LGBT history; 2) Current and Societal Issue Discussion; 3) Informed Action and Service Learning; and 4) Simulations of Democratic Processes. These are aligned with the four pedagogical practices laid out in ISBE implementation guidance, as well as HB376 and Public Act 101-0227.

## FOUNDATIONAL CIVIC KNOWLEDGE

A vast majority (over 80%) of students who reported taking social studies indicated that a breadth of topics were covered in their social studies classes. These included major themes in the history of the United States like tensions in our democracy and issues related to race, class, gender, socioeconomic status, or sexual orientation; the Constitution and founding principles; separation of powers; foreign policy and world affairs; ways in which people and their communities govern and create change; the role of media in democracy; and the roles and rights of individuals. For each of these topics, about half of students reported covering them in depth, about half reported covering them briefly, and very few said they were not covered or they couldn't remember.

While over half of surveyed students who took social studies (61%) reported that content on historical contributions made by the people who identify as Asian American or Pacific Islander (AAPI) in the past and present was covered in their social studies classes, that is still relatively low compared to the more traditional aspects of American history and government covered above. Further, only about one third of students reported that societal contributions made by people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer (LGBT) in the past and present was covered in their social studies classes, and only 10% reported that this topic was covered in depth. About 22% of teachers surveyed stated they did not cover historical contributions of AAPI populations at all in their class, and 22% stated they covered it very briefly or less than a class period. Additionally, 22% of teachers stated they did not cover LGBT topics in class and 44% stated they covered it very briefly or for less than a class period. Notably, while 56% of teachers reported covering this topic in depth, only 22% of students reported learning about it in depth.

Among students who did not take social studies, about two-thirds (68%) reported that they spent at least some time learning about laws, policy, or social issues. However, less than half of these students reported feeling as though they could make connections between the topics discussed in their class and their own lives and communities.

**Table 4: Teacher and Student Reporting on the Coverage of Foundational Civics Content**

Survey Question	Students who took SS, Spring 2023		Teachers 2023
	Covered topic briefly	Covered topic in depth	Covered topic in depth
Thinking about the social studies courses you have taken at your current school, how much was each of the following topics covered?			
Major themes in the history of the United States, including tensions in our democracy and issues related to race, class, gender, socioeconomic status, or sexual orientation.	36%	52%	90%
How the Constitution and founding principles have applied to and impacted diverse groups of people in the past and present	38%	53%	70%
The powers, authority, legitimacy, and limitations of each level of government (federal, state, and local).	37%	54%	50%
The relationship of the United States to other nations and to world affairs	41%	47%	70%
Ways in which people and their communities govern and create change (i.e., voting, lobbying, non-violent conflict, etc.) and address past and present problems.	41%	49%	80%
How news, social media, and other digital platforms and tools have impacted communities and created opportunities and challenges for civic and political engagement.	46%	39%	60%

Different roles and rights of individuals with various citizenship statuses in the United States	40%	42%	70%
Why and how different structures of government exist at local, state, and federal levels and impact multiple individuals and communities	40%	47%	60%
Societal contributions made by people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) in the past and present	21%	10%	33%
Historical contributions made by the people who identify as Asian American or Pacific Islander (AAPI) in the past and present	39%	23%	56%

## CURRENT AND SOCIETAL ISSUE DISCUSSIONS

Most students reported that they regularly took part in classroom discussions of current events in which multiple perspectives were presented. For students who took social studies, nearly three-quarters (71%) said they were encouraged to have these discussions at least once a week, and nearly a third (31%) said this happened almost every day. Outside of social studies courses results were similar: 69% of students were encouraged to have these discussions at least once a week, and 30% said this occurred almost every day.

Table 5: Student-Report Exposure to Current and Societal Issue Discussions

How often did your teacher encourage students to have discussions around current events where there are different opinions about the issues that allow them to listen to and understand diverse perspectives?	Never	A few times during the semester or term	About once a week	A few times a week	Almost everyday
In your social studies classes at your current school (students who took social studies)	5%	24%	13%	27%	31%
In classes other than social studies classes at your current school (students who did not take social studies)	0%	32%	16%	23%	30%
In courses you teach that include civics instruction (teachers)	0%	25%	25%	17%	33%

Most teachers reported that they did encourage student discussion and the vast majority stated that they took into account their own biases, students' lived experiences, and connections to the broader community while doing so.

Table 6: Teacher’s Report on Creating Safe and Inclusive Environment for Discourse

Please indicate how much you personally use each of the following practices in your own teaching	Teachers who said they did this “often” or “all the time”
Encourage students to discuss political or social issues about which people have different opinions	78%
Encourage students to express opinions while respecting others	89%
Take into account how my own identities and values affect my interactions and learning experience with different students	89%
Adjust my instructional approach and framing of certain content/topics based on my understanding of students’ lived experiences and backgrounds	88%
Give students frequent opportunities to connect their classroom work to their personal experiences, identities, and communities.	89%

Teachers generally saw discussion as an important tool for developing students’ ability to reflect critically on ideas and opinions and to articulate their thinking.

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*“It tends to be discussion that forces students to justify what they are arguing and to come to realizations and ideas on their own, based on what they are doing or reading, rather than presenting them with cookie-cutter answers.”*

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However, qualitative interviews revealed that teachers’ ideas of what qualified as discussion often included any sort of student talk in the classroom. For example, on teacher said:

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*“Most discussions we have at this point [are] just history things. If we’re talking about a certain war or a certain [event], we have discussions. ‘We took notes yesterday. Can you guys reiterate what we took notes on? Did you understand what the notes were?’ To get feedback from the class. Did they understand, or just write down what was on the board?”*

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While this is a type of student talk and sharing of information, it is not a discussion as intended by the pedagogical definition. Parker and Hess (2001) define a discussion as a type of shared inquiry using talking and listening about a piece of evidence toward a specific aim. More recent definitions increasingly include not only the co-construction of knowledge and a content-specific focus, but also the inclusion of and reflection on multiple perspectives (Lo, 2022). Using this definition, sometimes the activities teachers described as discussion were less clear; it is possible discussion was taking place, but it could be that students are completing the activity without taking part in a discussion:

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*"They had a short reading about each style of government. We kind of did this in a jigsaw approach and so they read about the basics of that government and they were then responsible for answering the question of 'when could this be an effective form of government?' Or 'who could this government work for?' And 'what are some problems that could exist with the style of government?' So they could have done some outside research on their Chromebooks to look up some of those issues. But then their basic understanding of the government just came from the short summary that I provided to them. And so then we ultimately went through as a whole class, and took notes on what each style of government was. We talked about and discussed the issues of 'where could this government work? Where could it be effective?' Versus 'where could problems arise,' and then ultimately came back around to the idea of: 'Why are we a republic?' Why does this form a government seem to work for America?"*

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While it is clear this kind of activity entails a co-construction of knowledge and a specific aim, it is also possible that students were sharing what they learned about forms of government and that the teacher was doing the work of filling in more complex ideas about the strengths and weakness of each during whole-class time, rather than creating space for students to meaningfully share and develop their own ideas and opinions.

In addition to some teachers' misperceptions of what constitutes a discussion, inconsistent reports in the survey data of access to current and societal issue discussions may be due to some teachers' qualitative reports of feeling nervous about having conversations about current and potentially controversial issues in the classroom, especially in the current political climate. As some teachers explained:

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*"Um, some of these later years I've had conversations go off the rails, and they've been hurtful or, you know, they have not been productive, and so that scared me into being much more cautious and not as willing to push those boundaries. Like you said, it's uncomfortable."*

*"Things have been very divisive more recently, and politics and government and things like that. So I've always tried to steer away from that just because it was uncomfortable. I worried about parents."*

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Students also felt that having productive conversations was difficult, and often wished for more guidance from teachers on how to manage these interactions:

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*"Well sometimes, like, it is hard to feel comfortable, depending on the situation, especially because a lot of times people take like their opinion to the extreme and then they make assumptions about things."*

Facilitator: *"Does your teacher provide context to help manage the conversation? Does your teacher provide some rules or help to make the conversation go well?"*  
Student: *"No there's like no rules, she just lets us talk. I mean, if it gets out of control, she'll stop us."*

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Another possible explanation is that this kind of activity and engagement is relatively new for both teachers and students, and ramping up to the kinds of discussion the standards and pedagogies are intended to promote may take time, practice, and deliberate shifts in expectations. As one teacher described:

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*“A lot of times, I’ll give them, like, documents or laws and things like that. They’ll have to talk over it in groups. They have discussions, right? I’ll give them guiding questions that they have to work through collaboratively, and then later on we’ll share out in class and they have little debates and arguments within that whole group. I did not see nearly as much opportunity for that before these civics standards were added. I feel like from last year to this year there are a lot more hands-on activities, and the kids didn’t necessarily like that at first. But they’re getting a lot out of it, you know, after they work through the discomfort and getting through the expectations and ‘how do we do this?’ They really do. They get a lot more out of it.”*

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Teachers also cited a lack of training and support for having these discussions and learning to facilitate them in a difficult political environment, as well as the exhaustion many teachers and students alike are battling in the post-pandemic school environment:

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*“Having civics teachers who are challenged in a discussion environment navigate some spicy topic: I think some of us are better at that than others. And like, we’re fine. But I think the assumption is that somehow the people who aren’t good at that will just figure it out, and they don’t. They’re either bad at it, or they don’t do it.”*

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*“One [barrier] would be exhaustion. So, looking for the path of least resistance. And, yeah, I understand. I know the value. We should be having more discourse. It’s just ... I need to muster that enthusiasm and resilience to do that repeatedly, because it’s exhausting.”*

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This is an area where, despite their best efforts to encourage discussions and an understanding of what these opportunities should be able to do for students, teachers may need ongoing practical support and development when it comes to strategies for effectively implementing discussions and navigating the complex political landscape of Illinois schools.

## INFORMED ACTION AND SERVICE LEARNING

Access to informed action and service learning projects was fairly widespread, although use of best practices in implementing these projects was much less common. Most students (76%) said they had an opportunity to apply their civic learning to the real world through a service learning project. However, when it came to actually taking informed action on these issues, only about a third of these students reported opportunities to propose changes to solve problems in their school or local community in social studies or any other classes, and nearly half (45%) of teacher respondents indicated that they never do this in their classes.

Table 7: Student- and Teacher- Report on Service-Learning Experience

Question	Students who took social studies	Students who did not take social studies	Teachers
As part of one or more classes, did you have an opportunity to apply the academic content you learned to real-world challenges through projects and/or service-learning? This could include writing letters or meeting with a decision-maker to ask for change, raising awareness about the issue with members of their community, raising money or collecting goods to donate, or conducting and publishing research to inform others	78%	63%	89%
Did you play a role in choosing the issue or planning the project?	25%	16%	25%
Did you discuss the project with peers before working in the community?	30%	24%	17%
Did you conduct research and analyzed information and data?	37%	32%	67%
Did you work closely with people in the community (not just people who were part of my school) on the project?	14%	10%	0%
After the project, as part of an assignment, did you spend time writing about what you learned and how it relates to your community?	27%	16%	33%

However, critical strategies involved in student projects were lacking in social studies classes and even more so in other classes. Only 25% of students who took social studies and 16% of non-SS students said that they played a role in choosing the issue or planning the project, and only 25% of teachers reported that this was a part of student involvement in the project. This is an important factor in empowering and engaging students in these projects and helping ensure that they are student-led. Similarly, both students and teachers indicated that the majority of decision-making for these projects was teacher-led. The most common practice incorporated as part of service learning was conducting research and analyzing information and data as part of the project, but even for that aspect only 37% of students who took social studies and 32% of non-SS students said they did so, and two thirds of teachers reported this was a part of student involvement in the project. While this is an important part of a meaningful service learning experience, it is also a much more traditional part of schooling and student projects, and may not be indicative of student agency overall in the projects.

There was also a lack of connection between students and people outside of the school community. While no teachers surveyed said that engaging with the broader community was something they incorporated into their classrooms, 14% of students who took social studies and 10% of non-SS students reported working closely with people in the community on the project, which may have been a part of service experiences. Finally, the opportunity for meaningful reflection about service experiences and projects is a crucial component of service learning, but one only about a quarter of students had access to it: just 27% of students who took social studies and 16% of non-SS students reported that after the project, as part of an assignment, they spent time writing about what they learned and how it related to their community. Additionally, 33% of teachers reported this was a part of student involvement in the project. However, despite only a minority of teachers using these critical strategies, 42% of students who took social studies and 39% of non-SS students reported that civic learning and

engagement opportunities provided them with a deeper understanding of issues facing their community.

**Table 8: Student Reporting on Decision-Making within Projects**

When you or your class decided on what types of topics to take on or which action to take for the project, who decided what to do?	All or Mostly the Teacher	About half the teacher and half students	All or mostly Students
Students who took social studies	55%	30%	15%
Students who did not take social studies	52%	38%	10%
Teachers	83%	17%	0%

## SIMULATIONS OF DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES

When it comes to simulations of democratic processes as a pedagogical practice, there appears to be a significant mismatch between teachers’ reported use of specific strategies and students’ recollection of these activities taking place. About half of teacher respondents reported doing each type of activity that simulated democratic processes in at least one class or more; the most common one was playing an online game (58%). Additionally, 67% of teachers reported engaging students in reflection after doing a simulation activity, which is an important part of helping students relate their simulation experiences to broader themes and content from the class and to helping them understand how the decisions, processes, constraints, and incentives they faced during a simulation are relevant to current and historical actors.

However, students recalled participating in fewer and less varied simulations than their teachers reported using. The only simulation that over half (63%) of students remembered engaging with in their social classes was analyzing a scenario, case study, or dilemma to understand how complex decisions are made by government officials and/or community members. Meanwhile, 40% reported playing an online game (independently or with others) that simulates how the government works, and approximately a third or fewer students in social studies classes reported interacting with classmates in a tabletop game to simulate how the government works; taking on the role of a citizen and/or government official to understand the rights and responsibilities of citizens; and taking on the role of a government official to understand how the government works.

In interviews, teachers reported using a range of simulation techniques, with efforts that ranged from elaborate, multi-day scenarios simulating the Congressional process to asking students to put on headsets and visit a virtual refugee camp. Many teachers talked about how simulations could be a useful tool for developing other skills necessary for discussion, reflection, and core civic learning experiences above and beyond the simulation. For example, some teachers felt simulations were a good way to expose students to multiple perspectives and have them engage with viewpoints that differed from their own:

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*“Civics, I think, is important for people to have perspective beyond their own, not perspective on anything in particular, but recognizing that there are different points of view on many matters, all matters really, so being able to debate appropriately and open-mindedly versus just shutting other opinions out.”*

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*"It was extending the driving permit age. And obviously they want it to be as short as possible, because they want to get on the road as soon as possible, and so they had to represent ideas that didn't necessarily align with themselves. But it did align with the sources they had. So that was a good one about listening to alternative perspectives and supporting it with evidence, and then they had to try and incorporate one point from the alternative side."*

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Teachers also used simulations as a structured means of building toward discussion and as an opportunity to practice critical reflection:

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*"They were assigned different roles, and we had practiced so hard on student-to student communication. Instead of me telling 'Elena said this to José,' instead I was like 'Elena, you need to say it to him.' Like, I am not a LEGO connector here that the two of you need me to talk, and so we practiced that several times. And then by the time we got to this lesson it was pretty good where they would talk to each other."*

*"But that's what's really fun about it: afterwards we have a huge conversation like, 'why do you think that this ended up this way? Is it this way that it really should have happened historically, what happened historically, how could we have changed this?' And then, just speaking on like, 'okay, well if the history had been different, right? What could have been the outcomes? What could have started off from there right?' One tree branch has so many other limbs that can come off of it and it just becomes this really beautiful conversation, and it's cool."*

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Despite seeing many benefits to simulation as a teaching tool, teachers also acknowledged that it could be problematic if not handled well, and some may be reluctant to dive into more complex scenarios as a result:

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*"A lot of teachers don't necessarily enjoy simulations because they can get iffy, right, depending on what you are talking about. But I really do feel that that's the best way for the students to learn. It's just about how you're creating them. You just have to be really, really careful about the boundaries within that simulation."*

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Thus, while teachers are often eager to use simulation in their classrooms, they may need support to develop larger and more complex activities that students will recognize and remember in order to really see the benefits of this pedagogical strategy.

Table 9: Student- and Teacher-Reporting on Simulations of Democratic Processes

As part of a social studies class at your current school, did you ever engage in any of the following types of democratic simulations or activities?	Percent of social studies students who reported engaging in the simulation activity	Percent of teachers who reported doing this activity in one or more of their classes
Playing an online game (independently or with others) that simulates how the government works	40%	58%
Interacting with classmates in a tabletop game to simulate how the government works	22%	42%
Taking on the role of a citizen and/or government official to understand the rights and responsibilities of citizens	39%	50%
Taking on the role of a government official to understand how the government works	32%	50%
Analyzing a scenario, case study, or dilemma to understand how complex decisions are made by government officials and/or community members	63%	50%

**Q1b: How are teachers able to use inquiry as a mode of learning about civics content?**

**INQUIRY AS THE PRIMARY MODE OF LEARNING**

Among students who took social studies there appears to be fairly strong adoption of inquiry-based instructional practices. Around 60% of students said that they were able to identify and create essential questions, use information from multiple sources, make decisions as a group, and share outcomes with authentic audiences. One area that lagged behind was opportunities to investigate causes and solutions to social problems. This finding was similarly reflected in items about service learning: only 30-40% of students said they had the opportunity to suggest potential solutions to community or school issues. One potential explanation could be that this is an area of political contention and controversy in social studies that teachers may be shying away from in the current political climate. Outside of their social studies classes, about half of students said that they engaged in most of the inquiry practices, but only about a quarter (26%) said they were able to share their ideas, opinions, or research with authentic audiences.

These findings contrast with teachers’ reported use of inquiry practices: nearly all said they incorporate information from multiple sources and 72% said they investigate causes and solutions to social problems—many more than the proportion of students who recalled engaging in those practices. However, less than half of teachers said they used essential or supporting questions and group decision making, and only 9% said they engaged with authentic audiences. This may be an indication that in the few places where those activities did occur, they were especially impactful, meaningful or stood out to students, and so they were more likely to remember and report them.

Table 10: Student- and Teacher-Report on Learning through Inquiry Process

When thinking about various tasks and activities in which you engage at your school, which of the following happens in Social Studies classes and in other classes?	Students who took SS		Students who did not take SS	Teachers
	Did this in social studies classes	Did this in other classes	Did this in any class	Do this regularly in their classes
Identify and create essential and supporting questions about the United States Constitution	68%	15%	N/A	N/A
Identify and create essential or supporting questions about a big topic	66%	55%	76%	21%
Investigate causes and solutions to social problems (e.g., food waste, pollution)	43%	55%	80%	73%
Use data and research from multiple sources to understand and analyze issues, consider claims and counter-claims, and form an argument	64%	57%	94%	91%
Regularly make decisions as a group using a range of methods (e.g., debate, deliberation, voting, negotiating, choosing randomly, deferring to experts, etc.)	52%	45%	60%	36%
Share ideas, opinions, and research with authentic audiences (e.g., community members, policymakers)	48%	35%	60%	9%
Propose changes to solve problems in their school or local community	34%	42%	74%	9%

## CRITICAL THINKING

A common theme that came up during teacher interviews was developing and using critical thinking skills during civics instruction and thinking about an inquiry-based approach to social studies as skills based on and transferrable to broader educational goals. For example, two teachers described their method of developing critical thinking skills in the classroom:

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*"I think one thing that I try to work hard on in my class is just basic critical thinking skills. Thinking more deeply about topics, understanding all sides of an issue or topic, reading multiple sources or multiple interpretations of a topic, and not just taking an issue as black or white and that's the way that it is. Kind of coming to a full understanding of something before making a decision on it. Teaching students the 'Why?' You know, as far as why do we participate in a democracy?"*

*"I really try to focus on critical thinking and not necessarily that there's a right or wrong answer for certain things, but trying to understand an issue or topic and understand why you feel that way about it, or at least be able to explain why you feel that way about it."*

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Data from student focus groups also indicate some alignment in developing their critical thinking skills by writing essays, elaborating on discussion responses, and analyzing relevant material:

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*“And if you have an answer, the teacher wants you to go more in depth with your answer and continue the conversation.”*

*“Sometimes you analyze a picture or a reading, right, like who made it, what they wrote about.”*

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This kind of skill development and transferability was also reflected in how teachers talked about simulations as useful tools in preparing students for other kinds of activities and building skills that are applicable across disciplines like discussion, persuasive writing, and analyzing evidence from multiple sources.

## MEDIA LITERACY

Across the board, all students surveyed reported that media literacy was a part of their middle school educational experience, both in terms of evaluating sources and synthesizing diverse perspectives. When asked “In one or more of your classes at your school, did you learn how to evaluate the quality of information from diverse multiple sources, based on the quality of evidence presented and diversity of viewpoints among authors?” 91% of students said yes. When asked “In one or more of your classes at your school, did you learn how to evaluate the quality and credibility of information and seek out diverse perspectives on social media?” 83% of students said yes.

Specifically, 63% of students who took social studies reported that they read and analyzed information in the news in social studies classes and 50% said they did so outside of social studies. For students who didn’t take social studies, 78% reported the opportunity to do so in other classes. Similarly, 62% of students who took social studies and 55% of those who didn’t said they were required to keep up with the news or current events in at least one class. However, opportunities to research, discuss, and write about issues related to elections, community, society and their impact on diverse community members were somewhat less prevalent. While 66% of students who did not take social studies said they had these opportunities and 61% of students who did take social studies said they had them in social studies, students who took social studies reported relatively low opportunities for engaging with these topics across disciplines. Similarly, while both students who did and did not take social studies reported opportunities to lead discussions, for students who took social studies those opportunities were not common across the curriculum.

Table 11: Student Exposure to Current Issues and News Discussion and Analysis

When thinking about various tasks and activities in which you engage at your school, which of the following happens in Social Studies classes and in other classes?	Students who took SS		Students who did not take SS	Teachers
	Did this in social studies classes	Did this in other classes	Did this in any class	Do this regularly in their classes
read and analyze information in the news (e.g., the difference between fact and opinion, how to evaluate information, etc.)	63%	50%	78%	55%
lead discussions about topics related to civics, government and/or history	72%	29%	80%	36%
research, discuss, and write about issues related to elections, community, society, and their impact on diverse community members.	61%	31%	66%	45%
In any classes at your school, were you required to keep up with current issues or the news by reading the newspaper, watching TV, or searching the Internet?	62% (any class)		55%	67%

In teacher interviews, media literacy was regularly brought up as something that was important and a foundational part of their teaching. However, teachers did not discuss specific strategies, pedagogies, or activities they used to incorporate media literacy into their teaching, nor how it connected to other content or skills they were working on.

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*"I would say a hot topic that is increasing in importance and coverage is media literacy."*

*"So really kind of giving them the tools for how to engage in learning about civic topics. Media is the core, the beginning. And it's an important piece, because it's really complicated."*

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This is an area where further exploration and understanding of current practices and resources may be helpful. While there are many curricular resources available to teachers, they may be struggling to make sense of these multiple options or approaches. Alternatively, they could be very confident in this area of their teaching and already be receiving significant support. Regardless, efforts to connect media literacy to existing pedagogical approaches is one way that teachers may be able to more clearly see the links between this important component of social studies education and the broader civic learning goals at their schools.

## CIVICS ACROSS THE CURRICULUM AND IN EXTRACURRICULARS

Although students who enrolled in social studies reported that they had access to inquiry-based and civics focused instructional practices outside of social studies at relatively low rates, among students who did not take social studies in middle school there were significantly more opportunities to partake in these activities across disciplines.



When students not enrolled in social studies were asked in which classes they learned about laws, policies, or social issues, 42% of students reported that this learning took place in English and about a third (32%) in physical or health education. Additionally, 10-15% of students said they learned about these topics in STEM courses. Only a small number reported civic learning taking place in other classes outside of social studies, English, or physical education.

**Table 12: Learning Civics Concept Outside of Social Studies Classes**

Students who learned about laws, policies, or social issues (e.g., healthcare reform in health, food policy in physical education, environmental policy in science) in classes other than social studies	
English	42%
Physical Education/Health/ROTC	32%
Science/Technology	14%
Math	10%
Art/Music/Theater	6%
World Language	6%
Other	6%
Media/ Library	4%

\*Figures in this table represent only those students who said they had not taken a social studies class so far.

Similarly, service-learning projects took place in a wide range of classrooms, even if they were predominantly centered around social studies, civics, and history. About a third (35%) of students said that these projects took place in English, and 16% said this happened in a STEM class. Interestingly, physical education and health were also a relatively common option for these projects, which is consistent with where students who didn't take social studies are able to access civic learning opportunities.

**Table 13: Classes Where Service-Learning was Included: Student-Report**

As part of one or more classes, did you have an opportunity to apply the academic content you learned to real-world challenges through projects and/or service-learning? This could include writing letters or meeting with a decision-maker to ask for change, raising awareness about the issue with members of their community, raising money or collecting goods to donate, or conducting and publishing research to inform others. Which class or classes was this project or projects part of?	
English/English Literature/Writing	35%
Civics, American Government or Government	30%
History	31%
Math, science or computer science	16%
Health, Physical Education	13%
Art, Music, or Theater	7%
World Language/Foreign Language	7%
Media/Library	6%
Other	6%
Capstone or other project-based class	2%

Finally, civic learning across disciplines may take place in non-classroom settings, often through extracurricular activities. Because middle school represents a less-structured extracurricular environment, we asked students to think expansively about the kinds of activities they participate in both in and outside of school, and how those experiences impact their civic learning and development. Fully 78% of students surveyed said that they participated in extracurricular activities. However, none of the teachers who took the survey reported leading or overseeing a club or extracurricular activity. While this is an indication that many students are engaging in civic life, there may not be a strong or established tie between the kinds of civic learning that takes place in classrooms and the more informal civic education that comes with belonging to a group or association.

It could also be an indication that not many extracurricular activities are offered within schools for this age group. Because the survey was administered to staff members who were responsible for implementing civic learning, it seems likely that to some extent extracurricular activities are not yet closely associated with civic learning in these schools. At the same time, students reported strongly positive experiences in these activities and many opportunities for civic learning. Many students found opportunities for personal growth and ways to engage with things that mattered to them. This may be an area where schools can consider more robust programming and opportunities for students to engage outside of class.

**Table 14: Frequency and Quality of Extracurricular Experience**

Question	Students who Agree
Have you participated in any organized groups or clubs at school such as sports teams, chorus or band, student government, cultural groups, volunteer service groups, or social clubs, in which students meet regularly and sometimes make decisions together?	78%
My participation in the group or club was challenging and helped me learn new skills	72%
My participation in the group or club made me feel that adults in the group were supportive and caring	79%
My participation in the group or club made me feel that students in the group were supportive and caring.	75%
My participation in the group or club prepared me to be an active member of my community.	62%
My participation in the group or club provided me with a deeper understanding of issues facing my community.	39%
My participation in the group or club helped me find my voice about issues I care about.	43%
My participation in the group or club deepened my understanding of myself and others with different perspectives and experiences.	65%
My participation in the group or club allowed me to use my voice in school and classroom decision-making.	51%
My participation in the group or club allowed me to impact my community in positive ways.	52%
My participation in the group or club helped me connect more deeply with my roots and community.	49%

In summary, we find that middle school educators hold generally positive perceptions of the new instructional mandates and value the support and resources that come with the new requirements. So far, foundational content instruction and service learning are relatively more widely implemented than current issue discussion and simulations. Although both student and educator reports indicate that all the required pedagogies are being utilized, there is room for growth in increasing depth and variety in use of those pedagogies (such as simulation of democratic processes, inquiry-based learning), and integrating student voice and peer-learning (e.g., in

service-learning and current issue discussions). Educators and students alike seem to understand that civic learning in middle-grade in Illinois does emphasize critical thinking by use of inquiry as a mode of learning and integrating media literacy. Newly mandated topics, including positive contributions made by LGBT and AAPI people in Illinois and national history are slower to be picked up by teachers. As we discuss in the next section, teachers may need explicit leadership support to incorporate issues that may be seen as political or inappropriate in any way by community stakeholders.

Civic learning does indeed seem to happen across the curriculum and outside of the classroom in the schools we studied. Civic learning is happening most in social studies, but nearly as likely to be happening in English Language Arts and Health classes. There is much room to grow for civic learning to mesh into STEM and Media/Library instruction. A vast majority of students participate in extracurricular activities and those who participate find the groups/clubs they are in to be a welcoming community where they develop skills and learn to be a community member.

## Section 2: Barriers and Opportunities for High Quality Civics Instruction

In the previous section we found that, while overall middle school civic learning implementation is moving in a positive direction, there were some key gaps: notably current and societal issue discussion and teaching about the historical contributions of LGBT and AAPI people. In this section we explore factors that may have influenced teachers' ability to implement some of the required content and pedagogy as reported by our participants.

Illinois' civic learning community is committed to civic excellence for all students, and identifying both areas of success and areas for growth through this evaluation contributes to that goal. To understand these factors, we also explore how some demographic and community factors might correlate with instructional fidelity. Finally, we report on the types of support and resources that have been identified as helpful and/or necessary.

### STRUCTURAL AND STAKEHOLDER CHALLENGES

**The first major challenge teachers faced in implementing civic learning initiatives was navigating their local political context—especially push-back from parents.** For many teachers, these were new topics or approaches that were perceived as an unnecessary addition to school, or a step outside of what was appropriate for students. Even when teachers were supported by their administrators, they still worried about having to deal with parental complaints.

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*"Just a few of very not nice conversations with some parents that were not happy with the conversations we had. And so then I said, 'Well, I can offer you my lesson plans. I can show you the state standards that they're aligned to.' You know, so then I became very defensive, and it was exhausting, and that was time-consuming, and it involved administration. And it was just like, okay, pick your battles. I pushed that one to the wayside too."*

*"I felt like I've always been supported by my administration as far as bringing these topics into the classroom. But parents [are] obviously one of the biggest concerns."*

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Both students and teachers also reported that apathy and disengagement on the part of parents made it difficult to connect what they were learning in school to the outside community.

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*"It's something that starts at home. It's not necessarily an interest to the parents. And the parents don't necessarily get involved in their education. And I think that really has an impact on the motivation of the students when they see that their parents and their own role models don't find schooling, or having a voice, or voting, or taking civics, democracy, any of it, they don't find any of that necessarily important, right? It's an example for the students that, why should they take an interest either? So, I would say, that's the biggest boundary."*

*"It's very disappointing how parents think of us, because the amount of parents that just don't care about either what we're doing in school or our grades, it impacts us so much. And some of the kids here, they don't have the, um, they're not really parented, so they think they're just free and they can do whatever they want. Which affects the school."*

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**The second major structural barrier teachers faced was the deprioritization of civics and social studies by their schools and/or districts, and the resulting lack of financial support, time, or resources:**

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*"What little civics and science that was being done at the elementary level went completely out the window, and I'm not just talking about my district, this was a national effect, went out the window, and they stopped essentially teaching civics in American history at all."*

*"I feel like we're kind of on an island. I don't know that anybody has a lot of knowledge or depth of the subject of civics, and what should be taught and why it should be taught the way that it should. For a long time, I think social studies and civics in particular, was kind of swept under the rug."*

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One tangible outcome of deprioritizing civics both on a national scale and at a local, district-wide level has been a lack of professional development opportunities related to civics, especially in relation to other subject areas.

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*"So in terms of professional development: on Friday I'm going to the first social studies professional development in 15 years. ... There is nothing for social studies generally. It's not seen as a priority. It's not out of malice. It's because this district has been financially challenged for some time."*

*"I think just in general we don't do a lot of professional development on civics, period. More recently, I think our last PD was on a social justice type of thing, understanding equality and equity, and those types of topics, which are civics related. But in general, we have had no professional development that I can think of directly related to civics and how to teach civics and what civics is, and I think just a very basic understanding of what that word means. And what topics go involved in teaching civics, and how we can do that would be very beneficial, especially for elementary teachers. ... If we have time, it's more of an afterthought than a focus."*

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Teachers also felt that they lacked tangible every-day resources related to civics and social studies:

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*"Well, we have no resources. We have no budget, and we have no textbook. I have not had a textbook adoption since 2001, so everything that we do here is either teacher-generated or free material from the Internet."*

*"Our funding priority is 0. We receive \$0. We do not have a textbook. We haven't had one for years. We're not going to have one again for years"*

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Despite these real challenges, teachers were excited about implementing better civics instruction and eager to share their ideas for how they could continue to improve.

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*"It might be very useful, for example, to add a service requirement in learning civics that could be done over a three-year period, where the student gets involved in seeing community political leadership, talking to people who perhaps hold office, reaching out to people who are experts. Something like that would be an excellent way to make civics real to students."*

*"I think, tying it back to just that idea of what civics is and not necessarily having to do an entire lesson in something. But anytime you see an opportunity to cite an example or take five minutes to further explain something that you're talking about, or make a connection or tie to something civics related, if you're reading a book or something like that, just little ideas to give teachers an understanding of what exactly civics is. And then I think they can have the thought to tie that into the curriculum how they see fit. So I would say the biggest pressing need is just an understanding of what is civics, various topics, and what should be the focus at each grade level?"*

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Overall, teachers want practical and simple ways to incorporate civics into their teaching, but lack tangible resources from administrators and often struggle with pushback from parents.

## DEMOGRAPHIC AND COMMUNITY CORRELATES TO INSTRUCTIONAL FIDELITY

In this section we explore which students are most likely to receive opportunities for high-quality civic learning, either as a result of school setting and policies, teacher capacity and training, and/or individual characteristics. In order to answer this question, we group students according to these contextual factors and look at differences in their overall reported experiences with different pedagogical approaches. Survey items were grouped to match core pedagogical practices and knowledge constructs using theory, and were summarized into scales ranging from 0-1 for each of these constructs using confirmatory factor analysis.

On average, we found that students who attended a school with fewer low-income students and fewer English language learners reported use of best practices in civics instruction more often relative to their peers at the other two schools. This finding is consistent with broader research on civic learning, which suggests that opportunities for high-quality civics instruction are inequitably distributed and tend to be more frequent in affluent schools (Kahne et al., 2013; Kahne et al., 2008). These differences are largest in terms of access to simulations and to the use of inquiry as the primary mode of learning.

Table 15. Mean Summary Scores of Pedagogical Approaches by School, scaled from 0-1.

School	Inquiry as Primary Mode of Learning	Current & Societal Issue Discussions	Service Learning	Simulations	Foundational Civic Knowledge
Northeast Junior High (Suburban)	0.34	0.36	0.44	0.47	0.53
Chicagoland Middle School (Semi-urban)	0.24	0.26	0.33	0.32	0.45
Central Middle School (Semi-rural)	0.25	0.30	0.34	0.24	0.48

Several reasons could explain these school-level differences in student-reported learning opportunities, and qualitative interviews do not reveal a clear explanation but suggest possible causes. First, while teachers from all three schools said that social studies was not a priority relative to other subject areas, students at the suburban school received the most consistent social studies instruction across all three years of middle school, which may have made it possible to develop classroom norms and routines to support more regular use of inquiry across time. In addition, in this school students were consistently tracked by ability. While we do not see significant differences in student-reported pedagogical experiences based on self-reported achievement, this kind of grouping may create spaces in which teachers have an easier time scaffolding and differentiating instruction day-to-day, and may therefore make them more likely to experiment with new and complex classroom activities, such as a wider variety of simulations.

Despite these gaps at the school level, within schools there was not a meaningful relationship at the individual level between parents’ education or students’ self-reported achievement and their access to high-quality civics education pedagogies. However, there were differences in access to pedagogies by race. Specifically, White and Hispanic/Latinx students reported more frequent opportunities for current and societal issues discussions, inquiry-based instruction, and informed action and service learning relative to their peers of other races. In addition, White students had more access to foundational civic knowledge topics and to simulations relative to their non-White peers. Overall, this suggests that students who belong to a non-majority racial/ethnic group, may have fewer opportunities for high-quality civic learning.

## USE AND EFFICACY OF SUPPORT AND RESOURCES

About 62% of the teachers who participated in the pilot course on Constitutional Democracy as Content and Practice were middle school teachers, which represented a significant shift in the audience for GoD courses toward a new audience hoping to better meet the demands of new mandates. Thus, while the findings presented below cannot be attributed directly to middle school experiences, they are largely driven by participants who teach at the middle school level.

Among all teachers who took the Bronze-level pilot, we see significant gains in both their knowledge of core EAD concepts, and their confidence and their comfort using instructional practices aligned with state standards, inquiry-based instruction and EAD-aligned principles. Notably, 83% of teachers who took the course said they were “very comfortable” integrating state standards on constitutional democracy into their teaching on the post-survey, compared to just 26% on the pre-survey.

Table 16: Teacher pre/post survey responses from teachers who took the EAD-aligned GoD course on Constitutional Democracy as Content and Practice

Question	Pre-test	Post-test
Understanding the purpose of the Five Design Challenges posed by the EAD framework	22% correct	61% correct
Identify the 6 EAD core pedagogical principles of high-quality classroom instruction on constitutional democracy	59% correct	94% correct
How comfortable are you with integrating your states' standards on constitutional democracy into your teaching?	26% said very comfortable 59% said somewhat comfortable	83% said very comfortable 17% said somewhat comfortable
How comfortable are you with implementing EAD pedagogical principles and teacher moves in your classroom?	19% said very comfortable 44% said somewhat comfortable	44% said very comfortable 56% said somewhat comfortable
EAD's approach to social studies emphasizes depth over breadth and pluralistic points of view and uses academic inquiry and discourse as a mode of learning to build student civic knowledge and disposition. To what extent does this approach align with the way you currently teach?	22% said very much 26% said quite a bit 37% said somewhat 15% said not much/not at all	33% said very much 28% said quite a bit 39% said somewhat

Teachers' qualitative assessments of how the course impacted their teaching were also strongly positive and included some teachers reporting they intended to make changes in their teaching practice. These shifts include making more direct connections between historical content and civics, and working to develop a positive classroom climate based on trust and student voice to help make space for difficult conversations and discussion of current and societal issues.

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*"I will begin adding teaching civics within my ancient/world history curriculum. I will have the students make connections to how civics affects their lives and community."*

*"By providing students more of a voice in the classroom, using inquiry-based learning, using more peer reviews, allowing students more time to get to know each other in order to build trust, and integrating more perspectives from our country's history."*

*"I also want to include many diverse opportunities for students to get to know each other better to build trust and community within our classrooms with a goal of being able to withstand tough conversations in a civil manner."*

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Teachers who participated in the study and took the GoD courses echoed these sentiments and said that the GoD courses made them more intentional and reflective in their teaching.

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*"Just doing the Guardians of Democracy has made me analytical. Like, evaluate what I'm doing, call out what I'm not doing, is really what I really learned."*

*"I think those classes helped us to form our understanding of what we should be doing in the classroom."*

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Teachers were more aware of what strategies they could be using to engage students in civil dialogue, or where to go for resources and materials when they needed support. They found that both the opportunity to reflect on their current practice and a sense of direction towards how to continue improving helped shape their approach to integrating civic learning and efforts to continue to develop their practice over time.

## Section 3: Connections between Student Experience and Civic Competency

In this section we focus on the 8<sup>th</sup> graders who were exposed to various forms of civics instruction to varying degrees as we have described so far. We now turn to students' own assessment of the outcomes of their civic learning and engagement experiences throughout their middle-school years. We ask: do these investments following the passage of the Middle School bill seem to be making an impact on students' civic competency?

First, taken as a group, do 8<sup>th</sup> graders in Illinois believe that they gained deeper understanding of their own identity, issues facing their community, and connect book-learning with real-world issues? We explore shifts in answers to that question from our 2022 and 2023 surveys: findings suggest that a greater portion of students were able to make these connections later in the implementation process (2023) than earlier (2022). Because different schools participated in years 1 and 2 of this study, we cannot treat this as conclusive evidence that implementation is moving forward. However, the differences are notable and fairly large, especially on measures like understanding of self and others with different perspectives, and engaging their student voice in classroom decision-making.



Table 17: Response to the School-Community Connection Questions

Thinking of all the civic learning and engagement opportunities at your middle school, <i>in which of the following ways have you been able to make a clear connection between the topics that you read about or discuss in class, and your own life/community?</i>	2022 Spring (% saying yes)	2023 Spring (% saying yes)
Prepared you to be an active member of your community by increasing your knowledge of how the government works and your rights and responsibilities.	39%	43%
Provided you with a deeper understanding of issues facing your community.	43%	46%
Deepened your understanding of yourself and others with different perspectives and experiences.	41%	52%
Engaged student voice in school and classroom decision-making.	27%	38%

Note: The 2023 data includes an additional school that was not able to participate in year 1 of this evaluation. Thus, a direct comparison between year 1 and year 2 cannot be made.

If students are making deeper connections between civic concepts and understanding of self, others, and their community, it is possible that students would be more inclined engage in civic behaviors. Indeed, data finds that the more of these authentic, real-world connections students make through their combined civic learning experiences, the more engaged they are in civic life. Our analysis showed that the students’ connection to the real world is positively correlated with civic behaviors ( $r = .30, p < .001, n = 393$ ).

While students’ civic engagement appears to be promoted by high-quality civic learning, there is no evidence that that students are talking about politics with their friends, especially on a regular basis. When asked how often they and their friends discuss politics, very few (3%) say they do so almost every day, and an additional 4% say they talk about politics a few times a week. A clear majority (57%) say they never or almost never talk about politics. **Thus, students seem to be developing foundational knowledge and a general sense of responsibility and connection to their local community, but not being politicized by civics education they receive at these schools.**

In summary, the primary impact of students’ structured civic learning experiences at Illinois’ middle schools appears to be students’ efficacy and engagement with community service and collecting resources for charitable causes. Fewer, though still a sizable minority of students engage with direct processes of constitutional democracy such as encouraging eligible adults to register or vote, reforming policies in their school or community, or joining a peaceful demonstration. That said, there is no evidence that these civic engagement activities are connected to students’ engagement with “politics” with friends, presumably outside of instruction time. As anticipated with 8<sup>th</sup> graders, Illinois’ civic education support seems to be appropriately growing students’ civic dispositions and capacity to contribute to civil society today, but not driving them to talk about politics as adults may be doing, with firm and often partisan opinions about current affairs.

Table 18: Student-reported civic behaviors in 2022 and 2023

In middle school so far, have you ever...	2022 Spring (% saying yes)	2023 Spring (% saying yes)
Worked to change a school policy or school rule?	24%	30%
Participated in a poetry slam, youth forum, musical performance, or other event where young people express their political views?	28%	25%
Worked with a group to try to change a policy or law in your community, state or nation?	19%	16%
Taken part in a peaceful protest, march, or demonstration?	14%	17%
Volunteered in your community e.g., by tutoring, mentoring, doing environmental work, working with the elderly, etc.	28%	39%
Done something to help raise money or resources for a charitable cause (e.g., participate in a walk/ run/ ride, bake sale, collect materials to donate, etc.) or political candidates?	30%	46%
Helped to register other people to vote or encouraged others to register or vote?	16%	14%

## Possible Drivers of Student Civic Competency

Our data indicate a connection between civic learning in Illinois and increasing civic behaviors, an authentic school-community connection, and a deeper understanding of self and others. We now explore two possible drivers of student connection and engagement: students’ background and instructional quality, which is facilitated by teacher capacity. For these questions we explore how students who are highest and lowest on key civic outcome indicators and school-community connections experienced different levels of social studies instruction and meaningful civic experiences through extracurricular activities.

To do so, we created four indices of student civic outcomes: 1) student efficacy to engage in civic life productively; 2) capacity to understand self, others, and community by connecting disciplinary content to authentic experiences; 3) a sense of personal responsibility to contribute to civic life; and 4) civic engagement behaviors.

Items included in these indices are listed in the Appendix and represented by items described in Table 19. For each of these indices we divided students into roughly equal-sized tertile groups (lowest, middle and highest) to make the findings more interpretable. These three indicators (civic efficacy, responsibility, and behavior) are modestly but significantly correlated with one another. Since they seem to represent distinct aspects of 8<sup>th</sup> grade students’ civic development, we examine how each of these outcomes relate to instructional quality and experience as well as student background (i.e., self-assessment of their grades). With these groups, we are able to “profile” each civic outcome indicator by these tertile groups through the amount and types of instruction and extracurricular activities students experienced.

### What We Tested

For instructional characteristics, we tested: Inclusive instructional design, Informed Action through Service Learning, Simulation of Democratic Processes, Foundational Civics content instruction, Current and societal issue discussion.

For school characteristics, we used student perception of positive school climate, opportunities to use student voice and extracurricular activities and student groups where students have opportunities for voice and participatory decision-making.

Our review of the findings in Table 19 highlights several themes. First, instructional quality matters across the four outcomes we tested, and it appears that some instructional strategies are especially important to move students from “feeling prepared to contribute” to “actually contributing” to their community. Service learning, student voice, and extracurricular activities seem especially strongly related to these outcomes. On the other hand, having high-quality discussions about current and societal issues appear to be especially important in helping students make connections between abstract and sometimes historical systems of government and events with authentic, real-world experiences and narratives; it correlates most strongly with the “connection” indicator. While usually not the strongest predictor of civic competencies, exposure to instruction on foundational civic content is correlated positively with all four outcomes.

Furthermore, some of the strongest correlates of student civic outcomes like student voice, positive school climate, and extracurricular engagement seem to be strongly correlated with one another, while only some pedagogical strategies are associated with greater levels of student voice, school climate and extracurricular engagement. The relationship between positive school climate and student voice was especially strong ( $r = .76$ ). On the other hand, student voice was unrelated to the amount of foundational civic knowledge instruction students received ( $r = .08$ ).

Students’ own background and academic performance had a significant and positive association with some, but not all, of the outcomes. Namely, students with the highest perceived academic performance (i.e., estimated class ranking) were also more likely to express a high level of personal responsibility for civic involvement and efficacy/confidence in handling tasks for civic engagement. However, they were no more likely than “average or below” grade students to report the highest civic engagement or to make more connections between their academic curriculum and real-world issues and challenges. As suggested by some teachers in their survey responses, family socialization appears to have a large influence on youth civic development; family members’ own civic engagement was positively correlated with all four outcomes, and family talking about social and political issues at home had a strong correlation with both civic responsibility and actual civic engagement. Finally, students’ self-identification as Caucasian is also associated with Connection and Engagement outcomes. These may be an artifact of the fact that White youth were far more likely to report having a parent or caregiver who has a bachelor’s degree or more, report higher grades, and are also more likely to have a civically engaged family and talk about social and political issues at home (all differences significant at  $p < .001$ ).

Finally, we conducted a sensitivity analysis to see if the instruction occurring outside of social studies classes were showing different or weaker association with student civic competency outcomes. Our analysis found no marked difference in the outcomes. This means that students who received more inclusive instructional strategies were more likely to report higher levels of civic engagement, regardless of whether this was happening in social studies class or not. As a result, our results are reported for the whole sample.

Table 19: Factors that are Associated with Student Civic Outcomes (factors are listed by order of magnitude by estimated effect size)

Student outcome	Family and individual characteristics associated positively with this indicator	Instructional or school characteristics associated positively with this indicator
Efficacy	Hispanic/Latinx <sup>***</sup> (see note 2) Higher grades <sup>***</sup> Civically engaged family* Higher parental education+	Extracurriculars <sup>***</sup> Student Voice <sup>***</sup> Service Learning <sup>***</sup> Simulation <sup>***</sup> Positive school climate <sup>***</sup> Foundational knowledge <sup>***</sup>
Responsibility	Higher grades <sup>**</sup> Family talks about societal issues <sup>**</sup> Civically engaged family*	Positive school climate <sup>***</sup> Service Learning <sup>***</sup> Extracurriculars <sup>***</sup> Student Voice <sup>***</sup> Simulation <sup>***</sup> Foundational knowledge <sup>***</sup> Inclusive instructional strategies <sup>***</sup> Current and societal issue discussion*
Connection	White <sup>***</sup> Grades* (see note 3) Civically engaged family*	Student Voice <sup>***</sup> Service Learning <sup>***</sup> Positive school climate <sup>***</sup> Simulation <sup>***</sup> Extracurriculars <sup>***</sup> Current and societal issue discussion <sup>***</sup> Inclusive instructional strategies <sup>**</sup> Foundational knowledge*
Engagement	Family talks about societal issues <sup>***</sup> White* Civically engaged family*	Service Learning <sup>***</sup> Extracurriculars <sup>***</sup> Student Voice <sup>***</sup> Simulation* Positive school climate* Foundational knowledge*

Notes:

1. **How to interpret the table:** <sup>\*\*\*</sup> p < .001; <sup>\*\*</sup> p < .001; <sup>\*</sup> p < .05; <sup>+</sup> p < .10 The smaller the p-value (more asterisks), the stronger a particular predictor's (e.g., Service Learning) an association with the student outcome on the first column that is not attributable to chance after accounting for the association between demographic factors and outcome.
2. The survey asked students if they identified as "Hispanic or Latino, Latina, Latinx, Chicano," which we summarize here as "Hispanic/Latinx" Students could tick multiple boxes to self-identify; as many Hispanic/Latinx students identify their race as White, we treated race and ethnicity for each group as a dichotomous yes/no code in which a person might belong to more than one group. Therefore, a student may be in both the "White" group and "Hispanic/Latinx" group at the same time. Due to small sample size, we combined people who ticked boxes other than White and Hispanic and did not decline to indicate their race into one group "race-other" to ensure student privacy and data confidentiality.
3. Students who reported in the top quarter but below top 10% indicated lower levels of connections than the other two groups.

## Synthesis and Implications for Future Practice and Research

Our two-year evaluation points to overall progress toward high-quality instruction in civics foundational content, service-learning, and other outcomes. Through quantitative and qualitative data, our data illuminate where and how implementation is going well and help identify opportunities for civic learning that can be further deepened or newly explored. Below we highlight key takeaways for our report, followed by recommendations.

### Content Instruction and Service-Learning Widely Implemented—with Room for Deepening Inclusive History and Student Voice

Although practices related to implementation continue to develop, so far middle schools appear to be moving ahead with developing students' foundational civic knowledge and incorporating the content standards related to civics into their classrooms—especially in social studies. Across traditional topics, 80% or more of students reported covering them at least briefly in their social studies courses. However, this has not yet extended to mandates on AAPI and LGBT historical roles and contributions. These topics could take more time for full implementation; while state standards and mandates, even if the law is clear on the requirement to teach certain content, public schools across the country must still try to balance these requirements with diverse community and caregiver opinions about what should be taught (Rogers et al., 2022).

In addition, while Illinois Civics Hub already offers grade-band specific resources for these content areas, teachers may need additional resources. Previous research also finds that teachers are more likely to implement issue discussions that could include disagreements when they have explicit support from administrators (Kawashima-Ginsberg & Junco, 2018). While administrators were outside of the scope of this study, advancing administrators' awareness about these new mandates and the need to provide explicit support to teachers may benefit this instructional content.

Similarly, service learning appears to be an area where implementation is going well. More than three-quarters of students surveyed said that they had the opportunity to do a service learning project during their middle school years. However, there is still room to grow in the quality of these projects and the extent to which they are student-led. Only 23% of students said they played a role in selecting the topic for their projects, and only 25% said they spent time reflecting on the projects afterward. These are important components that differentiate service learning from community service, and an area in which teachers may continue to focus.

### Issue Discussion and Inquiry Are Opportunities to Build and Leverage Student Capacity to Engage in Peer-to-Peer Learning

While most students reported that they had regular opportunities to talk about current events, it is not clear the extent to which these include real discussions, in which students respond directly to one another and explore multiple perspectives; they may instead be including more teacher-directed instances of student talk in the classroom. Many teachers reported that navigating pushback from parents and the political climate of their communities made it difficult to fully implement this aspect of civics instruction. This is an area where administrative support and clear, proactive communication with families can help teachers feel able to address current and societal issues in the classroom. Additional training and strategies for engaging current events while navigating the local political context may also help educators feel confident about leading discussions that are aligned with standards and pedagogically sound.

Although teachers are working toward inquiry as the primary mode of instruction, in many cases this appears to be driven by a move toward research and analysis and toward inclusion of multiple perspectives and varied sources in their teaching, rather than practices that allow students to be authentic agents in their own learning. As implementation continues, support to help teachers create opportunities for student decision-making and bridging the gap between the classroom and the wider community can help to expand teachers' notion of what

inquiry is and how it can inform instruction.

## Civics Across the Curriculum: Rich Opportunities for Civic Learning in STEM and Library/Media Yet to Be Tapped

One of the key distinctions between middle-school civics mandates and high-school civics mandates is that middle-school civics instruction does not have to be taught in a dedicated civics class, and delivery of civics instruction across disciplines is encouraged. Our analysis suggests that Civics across the curriculum is certainly possible, but some opportunities are relatively untapped and further support may be needed to advance cross-disciplinary civics instruction.

As implementation continues, schools may continue to expand opportunities for civic learning across disciplines to ensure ample opportunities for all students, regardless of whether or not they take social studies. While students who take social studies had greater access to civics-related pedagogy and instruction overall, students who did not take social studies tended to see these mandates reflected across a wider variety of subject areas. Early indicators suggest that ELA and Physical Education/Health are common places where students experience civics outside of social studies, STEM courses and especially Library/Media settings are key areas schools may look to expand civic integration opportunities. As part of this, increasing teacher understanding of inquiry-centered and inclusive instructional practices to ensure there is room for student agency, not just multiple perspectives and analyzing evidence, is one key lever for progress. Service learning is another key area for cross-disciplinary civic learning in middle schools. Deepening opportunities for service learning, above and beyond community service, could be another important lever for civic development. Making existing resources, such as the Guardians of Democracy course on Informed Action and Service Learning, more readily available and targeted toward middle school teachers may be one possible opportunity.

## Students' Perception of Voice and Positive School Climate Correlate with Instructional Practices, Civic Disposition, and Engagement

In this study we assessed, through student surveys, the extent to which civics instructional strategies and content coverage relate to students' perception of having a voice in classroom and school and school climate, and more broadly, their civic disposition and actual engagement. Data suggest that students express greater sense of voice and positive climate when they are exposed to instruction using pedagogies like service-learning, and simulation, and/or engaged in extracurricular activities that emphasize collaborative decision-making structure that is led by or includes students. Both instruction and extracurricular engagement are independently correlated with student civic outcomes such as personal sense of civic responsibilities, community connection and civic engagement in the school and local community. Consistent with prior findings in the field, parental socialization into civic life by talking about societal issues at home and modeling and involving youth in civic engagement activities correlated with student civic outcomes. On the other hand, neither of the demographic backgrounds, socioeconomic status (expressed in a proxy indicator of parental educational attainment) and race/ethnicity, was consistently correlated with civic outcomes.

These findings imply that: 1) well-implemented civics instruction can be an opportunity to allow students to increase their sense of agency and perception of their school as a place where students belong and matter, which in turn are correlated with a variety of educational outcomes such as increasing reading and mathematics proficiency and reducing negative behaviors such as bullying (Cohen et al., 2009; National Center on Safe and Supportive Learning Environments, and; ); and 2) civics instruction may directly support students' civic growth by engaging them directly in local community, discussion current societal issues, developing foundational knowledge of the civil society, and practicing, through simulations, the processes through which American institutions make decisions with and without citizen input. Finally, the magnitude of association between instructional practices and civic outcomes is far stronger than the association between student background and civic outcomes. That means that instruction, when delivered well and with fidelity, may help students from

various backgrounds to be on similar levels of civic readiness before they go to high school. That is a key priority given how unequal the civics knowledge achievement currently is between students from different socioeconomic and racial backgrounds (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2023)

Overall, these findings support the idea that schools should move toward holistic approaches to building students' civic competency by combining opportunities for civic learning across disciplines with school-wide culture and climate initiatives. Our findings suggest that pedagogical practices and overarching school environments are both strongly correlated with students' civic competency development, and that both are important, mutually reinforcing components of high-quality civic learning. Pedagogy may be more successful in positive, open environments that welcome student voice, and those climates may be more attainable when students are experiencing empowering and agentic opportunities for inquiry-based learning within classrooms. Rather than prioritizing one or the other, they can be concurrently developed as part of implementing the civics mandates.

## Directions for Future Research

Future research and evaluation on the state of middle school civics implementation should continue to explore the quality and sustained shift in teachers' instructional practices as well as how schools adapt to incorporate civics into existing coursework and schedules over time. Particular attention to better understanding the quality of discussions taking place in middle school classrooms, and how current political climate is impacting students' opportunities to meaningfully explore their own and others' perspectives, can help shape support and resources for teachers who are navigating implementation during contentious times. Similarly, continuing to evaluate the long-term impact of Guardians of Democracy coursework on teachers' practices and dispositions can inform ongoing professional learning and identify where challenges remain, even with training and support.

Another area that warrants further investigation and possible investments is the link between three elements: teacher capacity and administrator support, students' experience with instruction and perception of school, and student outcomes in civic and other domains. Research has long shown that positive school climate matters (Cohen et al., 2009) and this study shows promising correlations between instructional exposure, student perception of the school, and civic competency. Establishing a causal link through a longitudinal experimental study and expanding the range of student outcomes of interest (e.g., progress in student school attendance, math and reading progress, reduction in inequity in achievement) could further illuminate the positive impacts a comprehensive civic learning reform can bring at scale.

At the school level, a broader statewide understanding of how schools and especially administrators are making time for civics and the characteristics that drive those choices can support equitable opportunities for all students across the state. A clearer picture of when and where civics getting its own time or classes, and where is it being integrated into other classes, could help create a more robust picture of the variation in implementation and eventually an understanding of how these different approaches might impact students' civic outcomes.

## Recommendations and Resources

Based on our findings, we offer the following recommendations for a variety of stakeholders in order to support continued implementation and civic learning opportunities for all students.

## Recommendations For Schools

### 1. Create a safe and inclusive environment for both teachers and students to explore current and societal issues in the classroom

Our findings suggest that although teachers are working to create opportunities to talk about current events and social issues, those discussions may not always carry the benefits of engaging multiple perspectives or taking place in an open classroom climate, where students feel free to openly disagree with one another and with their teachers. Schools can take the time to assess and reflect on the extent to which students feel comfortable engaging with civil disagreement, and look for strategies to develop comfort with multiple perspectives and voicing dissent in the classroom.

- [A resource by the Learning Policy Institute](#) for building a safe and supportive school climate.
- [A recorded webinar](#) on navigating difficult classroom conversations

### 2. Support teachers in navigating pushback from parents when it comes to discussing current events and social issues.

One of the challenges teachers cited around engaging students in discussion is the fear or experience of pushback and negative reactions from parents. Administrators can play a role in communicating the value and standards-alignment of these conversations and in supporting teachers when issues arise. Proactive and positive communication with parents about what to expect and clear central messaging from all members of the school can help to address these challenges and support teachers in engaging with CCID.

- Illinois Civics Hub offers an administrator academy on how to support teachers, and [created a page](#) for answering questions about social studies.
- The American Historical Association also [issued statements supporting teaching](#) of American History that may be relevant to some districts.

### 3. Build and sustain strong community partnerships to strengthen student's holistic learning about community and disposition to engage in civic life.

Teachers reported that there were few opportunities for students to engage with community members and to share their work and ideas with authentic audiences. Students reported this occurring at a higher rate, which may mean that in the few cases where this did happen, it was especially impactful and memorable for students. Identifying ways to develop and incorporate opportunities for students to engage with the community outside of school (i.e., incorporating community organizations in school projects) can be a meaningful avenue for students' civic development and help develop a local perspective around issues students learn about and discuss in class.

- A recent effort by multiple associations that support community schools identified several [key practices for engaging communities](#).

### 4. Seek resources and support for teaching topics like AAPI and LGBT history in order to comply with the mandates.

While foundational civic knowledge is a strong area of implementation and it appears most students are getting a lot of civics-related content, newer mandated topics like AAPI and, especially, LGBT contributions are lagging further behind. That may be because these content areas are newer and fairly specific to Illinois's



standards, so they are not included in traditional or existing social studies or civics materials. Teachers may need access to additional resources and guidance for meeting these mandates and fitting these topics into their courses.

- See Illinois Civics' [Inclusive Curriculum Toolkit](#)
- Explore Asian Americans Advancing Justice's [TEAACH Act Toolkit](#)

## 5. Reflect on and develop extracurricular activities that provide collaborative decision-making and student voice opportunities

Although the extracurricular landscape is less robust at the middle school level than high school, it appears that, when considered holistically, extracurricular experiences can be valuable sites of civic learning and development for many students. These experiences may provide opportunities for collaborative decision-making, strengthening their sense of belonging and pride to a community, or engaging directly in the community through service. Schools could consider expanding their offerings and extracurricular programming to ensure all students, regardless of family background, have access to the kinds of shared communal experiences that contribute to development of their civic skills and identities.

- A [review of literature](#) on benefits of meaningful extracurricular activities
- A resource for [developing meaningful youth participation](#) and leadership

## 6. Commit to adopting a school-wide model for civic learning, such as becoming an Illinois Democracy School

As they seek to improve opportunities for civic learning across disciplines and especially to address school-wide factors including student voice, extracurriculars, school climate, use of inquiry, etc., schools may consider adopting a school-wide, integrated approach that considers civic development holistically, as something that takes place beyond social studies classrooms. One possible model for this is the Illinois Democracy Schools, which is in the process of expanding to a district-wide model appropriate for all K-12 schools.

- Learn more about the [recognition process](#) for the Illinois Democracy School Network.

## 7. Create space, resources, and opportunities to develop and implement a cross-curricular civic learning plan

While becoming a Democracy Schools provides a unique opportunity for school- and district-wide development of a comprehensive civic learning plan that encompasses school climate, leadership, school-community partnerships, and instruction, schools may consider starting with a focus on cross-curricular instructional planning. Our data indicate that civics instruction happening outside of social studies can be meaningful and effective, but that there are some missed opportunities to incorporate civics into STEM and Media learning time. Coordinating shared planning time for teams across disciplines and grades can go a long way in communicating a school-wide priority on civic learning and creating opportunities for teachers to grow as civic educators.

- Read about [real-world examples](#) from the Deeper Learning community, which emphasizes collaborative teaching and learning.

## Recommendations For Classroom Educators

### 1. Develop and teach strategies to for social studies and non-social studies teachers to model democratic practices.

Our findings suggest that students who are exposed to service learning, simulations, and current issue discussions show stronger sense of agency and perceive more positive climate. To strengthen the link between instruction, student perception of the school and civic engagement, teachers can develop more democratic climates within their individual classrooms by incorporating opportunities for students to make collective decisions using a variety of methods, and to exercise agency in their learning. For example, teachers can allow students to make decisions in choosing project topics and planning projects, or delegating responsibilities. Consistency and practice can help these processes become smoother and more efficient over time, developing important civic skills.

- Explore this [toolkit for creating civil and brave spaces](#) for civic learning.

### 2. Leverage opportunities for inquiry across disciplines to deepen students' critical thinking skills and develop students' capacity to form informed conclusions.

Teachers across disciplines should continue to center inquiry as the primary mode of learning in a variety of ways appropriate to student development and the subject matter. Although about two-thirds of students report using practices like investigating essential questions and analyzing multiple sources of evidence in their social studies classes, they are less likely to say they had opportunities to investigate causes and solutions, develop their own recommendations, or share that work with authentic audiences. These opportunities are also less common across disciplines outside of social studies settings. Identifying opportunities to explore a full inquiry arc may help deepen the use of inquiry and expand students' civic learning opportunities. As suggested in this report, there are many ways to enter into inquiry and teachers can vary types of inquiry based on students' readiness and topic.

- See this [resource](#) and [round-up](#) of the Illinois inquiry standards and related resources.

### 3. Develop pathways for students to exercise their own voice and choice in service-learning projects and make sure they have time to reflect and connect.

Although most students report taking part in service-learning projects, some findings suggest that these may miss important components of civic learning that are important to civic development, including student-centered decision making, community engagement, and the chance to reflect on what they learned and make connections between the project, what they learn in school, and their own lived experiences. Deepening these opportunities to ensure they are in line with best practices in service-learning could help improve their effectiveness in promoting positive civic outcomes for students. Use resources to diversify and deepen classroom simulations and take manageable steps towards trying new things.

- [Teachers can refer to this toolkit](#) for concrete examples and strategies to elevate youth voice and choice.

#### 4. Expand and diversify opportunities for learning about constitutional democracy through simulations of democratic processes.

Many students report that they have taken part in a simulation, but the form those simulations take tends to skew toward analyzing case studies and, in some cases, online games. This suggests that more complex and intensive opportunities to model democratic processes might be less common. Because these activities can require intensive planning and a level of trust and letting go of outcomes by teachers, they might take more support and training to develop and implement. Teachers may consider working together as a team or with a more experienced educator to make these kinds of activities possible, and seek additional professional learning support related to simulations.

This might help them to identify small, actionable steps towards live simulations of democratic processes that feel more manageable at the middle school level. An evaluation of the pilot course on Simulation of Democratic Processes in the Guardian of Democracy Project concluded that teacher benefit significantly from having a structured learning opportunity to learn about then apply this pedagogy because there are physical (classroom layout) and logistic (sequence and pacing of activities) aspects to this pedagogy that warrant hands-on coaching.

- Explore this [toolkit for simulation of democratic processes](#).

#### 5. Looking out for connections between ELA and STEM topics and civics standards

In interviews, teachers often mentioned the desire for more concrete, clear opportunities to make connections between civics standards and other content areas and a need for broader awareness of what civics is and how it fits into other parts of the curriculum. Working collaboratively among teachers to identify connections and cross-disciplinary opportunities to incorporate civics into core subject areas outside of social studies, including Math, Science, and ELA, could help establish clearer through-lines for civics content across students' middle school experiences and ensure that schools are meeting the mandates.

- Explore resources on how [Math and ELA teachers](#) can [integrate civic learning](#) into their routine and disciplinary skills and content instruction.

## Conclusion and Acknowledgments

Our two-year evaluation of progress in Illinois' middle-school civics mandates implementation points to promising early signs of success. Those positive signs are especially notable given that schools have only had about a year to implement the new mandates due COVID pandemic-related delays and disruptions.

The data reveal civics implementation has been especially successful in strengthening foundational civic knowledge and service learning. In addition, there are promising opportunities for expanding and deepening the use of key pedagogies, notably the discussion of current and societal issues and simulations of democratic processes. On the other hand, much more progress—and support to allow teachers to make that progress—is needed on instruction about the historical contributions of LGBT and Asian Americans.

There is also important evidence that civics implementation, and therefore civic learning, is taking place beyond the social studies classroom. In particular, there appears to be meaningful student learning and engagement through curricular activities. These opportunities show a lot of potential for scaling; we recommend identifying more best practices and examples of successful initiatives, and sharing them across networks to expand these opportunities.

Another key finding, as well as a promising focus for future research, is the connection between mandated instructional strategies and key civic outcomes. We find that students’ perception of student voice and of a positive school climate is an important factor in translating instruction into outcomes. Therefore, schools can strengthen the impact of mandates by moving toward a holistic, school-wide approach that combines cross-disciplinary pedagogical implementation with attention to overall school climate and culture. The Illinois Democracy Schools Initiative is one example of how schools can adopt or strengthen such an approach.

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- Illinois Civics Hub at DuPage Regional Office of Education
- The Lou Frey Institute and the Center for Distributive Learning at the University of Central Florida



**About CIRCLE:** The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) is a non-partisan, independent research organization focused on youth civic engagement in the United States. We conduct extensive research on youth participation, and we leverage that research to improve opportunities for all young people to acquire and use the skills and knowledge

they need to meaningfully participate in civic life. In all of our work, we are especially concerned with understanding, addressing, and ultimately eliminating the systemic barriers that keep some young people marginalized from and underrepresented in civic life. CIRCLE is part of the Tisch College of Civic Life at Tufts University.



Jonathan M. Tisch  
College of Civic Life

**About Tisch College:** The Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life is a national leader in civic education and engagement that sets the standard for higher education’s role in advancing the greater good. Building on Tufts University’s

strengths as a civically engaged, student-centered, research institution—and its aspiration to become an anti-racist institution—Tisch College’s North Star helps situate Tufts as an academic leader in a society in which democracy is at risk, and in which there is a need for just and effective governance for emerging multiracial societies.



**About Illinois Civics Hub:** The Illinois Civics Hub is a leading resource for information on the required implementation of civics classes in Illinois. The Hub runs the Illinois Democracy Schools Initiative, which supports a growing network of schools that are committed to empowering students

to nurture and sustain our democracy, especially when a growing civic empowerment gap exists between students of color and white peers in Illinois. The Illinois Civics Hub believes that expanding and prioritizing civic learning opportunities and experiences for schools will help to close the civic empowerment gap and improve overall democratic outcomes in our state. The Hub is based at the DuPage County Regional Office of Education.

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# Appendix

## Study Design

The goal of this evaluation was to measure the impact of Illinois’ middle-school civics legislation intended to help “young people acquire and learn to use the skills, knowledge and attitudes that will prepare them to be competent and responsible citizens throughout their lives” (Illinois School Code Section 27-22). This involved evaluating how the support given to middle school educators is affecting instruction and student outcomes. To do this, we collected data from a sample of Illinois students and teachers drawn from three districts that were selected to be representative of the school population in the state outside of Chicago.

**Table A1**

School	Enrollment	% Students of Color	% Students from Low Income Families	% English Language Learners	% Students with IEPs
Northeast Junior High (Suburban)	350	30%	8%	6%	10%
Chicagoland Middle School (Semi-urban)	1150	88%	54%	50%	15%
Central Middle School (Semi-rural)	500	48%	60%	23%	22%

Because the law states only that students are to receive a full semester of civics instruction by the time they complete 8<sup>th</sup> grade, but does not specify exactly when or how, we surveyed students in the Spring of their 8<sup>th</sup> grade year about their experiences across all three of their grades 6-8 middle-school years. We also spoke to various school staff members who were responsible for civics instruction, not just 8<sup>th</sup> grade social studies teachers. We surveyed students and teachers in Spring 2022 and again in Spring 2023, after teachers had had the opportunity to participate in professional learning opportunities (including the GoD program) to see if there were changes in student experiences between the two cohorts after an additional year of implementation. Data presented in this report comes from the following sources:

### Quantitative Data

#### 1. Student surveys

Student surveys were administered to the full 8<sup>th</sup> grade student body at each school in the Spring of 2022 and 2023. Surveys asked students about their experiences in social studies and other classes with content and instructional practices relevant to the mandates, frameworks, and resources considered in the design of the middle school civics implementation. Surveys also asked about their experiences with extracurricular activities, overall school climate, civic readiness, and demographics and family background. We received 516 responses in 2022 and 443 in 2023. Based on student responses, we used exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis to construct scales summarizing the pedagogical approaches and dispositions asked about in the survey, which are presented below.

#### 2. Teacher and staff surveys

Alongside the student surveys, teacher surveys were administered to staff in participating schools who contributed to civic learning and implementation efforts. We heard from six respondents in 2022 and 23 in 2023. While these relatively small samples make it difficult to draw overarching conclusions, they do offer insight into alignments and disparities between what students report remembering or experiencing and the intentions and/or efforts of the staff within their schools.



### 3. Surveys and portfolios of practice from the Guardians of Democracy pilot cohort

We draw some evidence presented in this report from the surveys and work product of teachers who participated in the Guardians of Democracy course on “Constitutional Democracy as Content and Practice.”

## Qualitative Data

### 4. Student Focus Groups

In early 2023 we conducted three semi-structured focus groups, each with 10 8<sup>th</sup> grade students from one of the schools in the study. While focus group data collection protocols were designed to be responsive to the students’ interests, comments, and ideas, they focused on students’ feelings and experiences related to the pedagogies included in the survey, their opportunities to connect what they learn in class to their lives and communities outside of the classroom, and how school and classroom climate impacted their ability to engage meaningfully with pedagogy and content.

### 5. Teacher Interviews

We conducted nine, one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with teachers and other staff members from the schools participating in the study. At least one interviewee from each school was a dedicated social studies teacher. Interviews took place across the first four months of 2023. Interviews focused on teachers’ approaches and dispositions towards teaching civics, the challenges and opportunities they encountered, their beliefs and attitudes, and the resources and support they had—or needed.

## Constructs, Questions, and Variables

Table A2

Construct/Index	Questions/Variables
Foundational knowledge	<p>Thinking about the social studies courses you have taken at your current school, how much was each of the following topics covered?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Major themes in the history of the United States, including tensions in our democracy and issues related to race, class, gender, socioeconomic status, or sexual orientation.</li> <li>• How the Constitution and founding principles have applied to and impacted diverse groups of people in the past and present</li> <li>• The powers, authority, legitimacy, and limitations of each level of government (federal, state, and local).</li> <li>• The relationship of the United States to other nations and to world affairs</li> <li>• Ways in which people and their communities govern and create change (i.e., voting, lobbying, non-violent conflict, etc.) and address past and present problems.</li> <li>• How news, social media, and other digital platforms and tools have impacted communities and created opportunities and challenges for civic and political engagement.</li> <li>• Different roles and rights of individuals with various citizenship statuses in the United States</li> <li>• Why and how different structures of government exist at local, state, and federal levels and impact multiple individuals and communities</li> <li>• Societal contributions made by people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) in the past and present</li> <li>• Historical contributions made by the people who identify as Asian American or Pacific Islander (AAPI) in the past and present</li> </ul>
	<p>In your current school, did you take a course in English, Math, Science or another non-Social Studies class in which you spent time learning about laws, policy, or social issues?</p>
	<p>Thinking of all the civic learning and engagement opportunities at your middle school, in which of the following ways have you been able to make a clear connection between the</p>

	<p>topics that you read about or discuss in class, and your own life/community?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>prepared you to be an active member of your community by increasing your knowledge of how the government works and your rights and responsibilities.</li> </ul>
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Table A3

Construct/Index	Questions/Variables
Inclusive instructional strategies	<p>When thinking about various tasks and activities in which you engage at your school, which of the following happens in Social Studies classes and in other classes?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>identify and create essential and supporting questions about the United States Constitution Did this in Social Studies Classes</li> <li>identify and create essential or supporting questions about a big topic</li> <li>use data and research from multiple sources to understand and analyze issues, consider claims and counter-claims, and form an argument</li> <li>regularly make decisions as a group using a range of methods (e.g., debate, deliberation, voting, negotiating, choosing randomly, deferring to experts, etc.)</li> <li>share ideas, opinions, and research with authentic audiences (e.g., community members, policymakers)</li> <li>identify and create essential questions and supporting questions about the United States Constitution, or a big topic - I did this in one or more courses</li> </ul>
	<p>In any classes at your school, were you required to keep up with current issues or the news by reading the newspaper, watching TV, or searching the Internet?</p>
	<p>In one or more of your classes at your school, did you learn how to evaluate the quality of information from diverse multiple sources, based on the quality of evidence presented and diversity of viewpoints among authors?</p>

Table A4

Construct/Index	Question/Variables
Simulation	<p>As part of a Social Studies class at your current school, did you ever engage in any of the following types of democratic simulations or activities?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Playing an online game (independently or with others) that simulates how the government works</li> <li>Interacting with classmates in a tabletop game to simulate how the government works</li> <li>Taking on the role of a citizen and/or government official to understand the rights and responsibilities of citizens</li> <li>Taking on the role of a government official to understand how the government works</li> <li>Analyzing a scenario, case study, or dilemma to understand how complex decisions are made by government officials and/or community members</li> </ul>

Table A5

Construct/Index	Question/Variables
Service Learning	<p>In any of those classes, did you study a particular social or political issue?</p>
	<p>When thinking about various tasks and activities in which you engage at your school, which of the following happens in Social Studies classes and in other classes?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>research, discuss, and write about issues related to elections, community, society and their impact on diverse community members.</li> <li>propose changes to solve problems in their school or local community</li> </ul>
	<p>Have you participated in any organized groups or clubs at school such as sports teams, chorus or band, student government, cultural groups, volunteer service groups, or social clubs, in which students meet regularly and sometimes make decisions together?</p>
	<p>Did you do any of the following as part of your project?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Discuss the project with peers before working in the community</li> <li>Conduct research and analyzed information and data</li> <li>Work closely with people in the community (not just people who were part of my</li> </ul>

	<p>school) on the project</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>After the project, as part of an assignment, spend time writing about what they learned and how it relates to their community</li> </ul>
	<p>Thinking of all the civic learning and engagement opportunities at your middle school, in which of the following ways have you been able to make a clear connection between the topics that you read about or discuss in class, and your own life/community?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>provided you with a deeper understanding of issues facing your community.</li> </ul>

Table A6

Construct/Index	Questions/Variables
Current and societal issue discussions	<p>When thinking about various tasks and activities in which you engage at your school, which of the following happens in Social Studies classes and in other classes?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>read and analyze information in the news (e.g., the difference between fact and opinion, how to evaluate information, etc.)</li> <li>research, discuss, and write about issues related to elections, community, society and their impact on diverse community members</li> <li>investigate causes and solutions to social problems (e.g., food waste, pollution)</li> </ul>
	<p>In any classes at your school, were you required to keep up with current issues or the news by reading the newspaper, watching TV, or searching the Internet?</p>

Table A7

Construct/Index	Questions/Variables
Extracurricular	<p>Please think about your participation in the school group or club that is most important to you when you answer the following questions.</p> <p>My participation in the group or club...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>was challenging and helped me learn new skills.</li> <li>made me feel that adults in the group were supportive and caring.</li> <li>prepared me to be an active member of my community.</li> <li>provided me with a deeper understanding of issues facing my community.</li> <li>helped me find my voice about issues I care about.</li> <li>deepened my understanding of myself and others with different perspectives and experiences.</li> <li>allowed me to use my voice in school and classroom decision-making.</li> <li>allowed me to impact my community in positive ways.</li> <li>helped me connect more deeply with my roots and community.</li> </ul>

Table A8

Construct/Index	Question/Variables
Positive school climate	<p>When thinking about your experience at your middle school so far, how do you agree or disagree with each statement below?</p> <p>At my school, I...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>am encouraged to express opinions in class while respecting others</li> <li>feel valued for my cultural background when talking about sensitive or controversial topics</li> <li>feel valued for my previous experience and knowledge when talking about sensitive or controversial topics</li> <li>feel comfortable talking about events that are happening in our school or community with my teachers</li> <li>learn and use strategies for overcoming learning struggles and persisting</li> <li>feel like I am in a community with other students who bring different perspectives and backgrounds to enrich my experience</li> <li>feel physically safe while in school</li> <li>can identify a trusted teacher or adult in my school that I can talk to if I need help</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>feel that teachers and adults respect my opinions and contributions I make in the school</li> </ul>
	<p>When thinking about how it feels to be at school and how students interact with adults and peers in the school, how much do you agree with the following statements?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students can express opinions in a group while respecting others</li> <li>Adults value student experiences, culture and knowledge when talking about sensitive or controversial topics</li> <li>Students who bring different perspectives and backgrounds enrich the learning experience</li> <li>Students feel comfortable talking about events that are happening in the school or community</li> <li>Teachers and adults feel comfortable talking about events that are happening in the school or community</li> <li>Students use strategies to overcome learning struggles</li> <li>Teachers and adults give students opportunities to be leaders both inside and outside the classroom.</li> </ul>

Table A9

Construct/Index	Questions/Variables
Student voice	<p>When thinking about various tasks and activities in which you engage at your school, which of the following happens in Social Studies classes and in other classes?</p> <p>Students...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>regularly make decisions as a group using a range of methods (e.g., debate, deliberation, voting, negotiating, choosing randomly, deferring to experts, etc.)</li> </ul>
	<p>When thinking about your experience at your middle school so far, how do you agree or disagree with each statement below?</p> <p>At my school, I...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>am encouraged to express opinions in class while respecting others feel valued for my cultural background when talking about sensitive or controversial topics</li> </ul>
	<p>Thinking of all the civic learning and engagement opportunities at your middle school, in which of the following ways have you been able to make a clear connection between the topics that you read about or discuss in class, and your own life/community?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>engaged student voice in school and classroom decision-making.</li> </ul>

Table A10

Construct/Index	Questions/Variables
Efficacy	<p>Suppose you found out about a problem in your school or community that you wanted to do something about. Please mark how much you agree or disagree with the statements below.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I would be able to create a plan to address the issue</li> <li>I would be able to organize and run a meeting</li> <li>I would be able to find and examine research related to an issue</li> <li>I would be able to express my views in front of a group of people</li> <li>I would be able to reach out to others to help me solve the issue</li> <li>I would be able to discuss the issue with leaders in my community</li> </ul>

Table A11

Construct/Index	Questions/Variables
Engagement	In middle school so far, have you ever

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Worked to change a school policy or school rule?</li> <li>• Participated in a poetry slam, youth forum, musical performance, or other event where young people express their political views?</li> <li>• Worked with a group to try to change a policy or law in your community, state or nation?</li> <li>• Taken part in a peaceful protest, march or demonstration?</li> <li>• Volunteered in your community e.g., by tutoring, mentoring, doing environmental work, working with the elderly, etc.</li> <li>• Helped to register other people to vote or encouraged others to register or voter?</li> <li>• Done something to help raise money or resources for a charitable cause (e.g., participate in a walk/ run/ ride, bake sale, collect materials to donate, etc.) or political candidates?</li> </ul>
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Table A12

Construct/Index	Questions/Variables
Connection	<p>Thinking of all the civic learning and engagement opportunities at your middle school, in which of the following ways have you been able to make a clear connection between the topics that you read about or discuss in class, and your own life/community?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• prepared you to be an active member of your community by increasing your knowledge of how the government works and your rights and responsibilities.</li> <li>• provided you with a deeper understanding of issues facing your community.</li> <li>• deepened your understanding of yourself and others with different perspectives and experiences.</li> <li>• engaged student voice in school and classroom decision-making.</li> <li>• have not been able to make a clear connection between topics in my classroom and my community</li> </ul>

Table A13

Construct/Index	Questions/Variables
Responsibility	<p>Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I am interested in societal issues and public affairs.</li> <li>• Being concerned with national, state, and local issues is an important responsibility for everybody</li> <li>• Everyone should be involved in working with community organizations or local governments on issues that affect the community.</li> <li>• I think it's important to get involved in improving my community.</li> <li>• Being involved in state and local issues is my personal responsibility</li> <li>• I can learn a lot from people with backgrounds and experiences that are different from mine.</li> <li>• I can learn a lot from people whose opinions differ from my own on societal issues.</li> </ul>

Table A14

Construct/Index	Questions/Variables
Civically engaged family	How often does your family discuss politics or social issues?
	How often have your relatives and parents engaged in political activities beyond voting? This means political activities that promote specific political parties, rules, or candidates. (e.g. signing a petition, volunteering for a campaign, advocating for workers' rights through union organizing, or attending political rallies and demonstrations.)

Table A15

Construct/Index	Questions/Variables
Demographic	How do you think your grades compare to students in your grade? Please make your guess, noting that this is not a test and we will not check your grades against your response.
	Thinking about an adult in your household (parents, guardians, foster parents, step-parents etc.), what is the highest level of education anyone has achieved?

The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) is a non-partisan, independent research organization focused on youth civic engagement in the United States. We conduct extensive research on youth participation, and we leverage that research to improve opportunities for all young people to acquire and use the skills and knowledge they need to meaningfully participate in civic life. CIRCLE is part of the Tisch College of Civic Life at Tufts University.

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