



CENTER FOR INFORMATION & RESEARCH  
ON CIVIC LEARNING AND ENGAGEMENT

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

# **An Evaluation of Illinois Middle School Civics Implementation Progress**

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# Authors and Contributors

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

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**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.

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.

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