



# A PUSH FOR CIVIC EDUCATION

Practices that increase civic awareness are plentiful and diverse

By Randall Reid and Emma Humphries

Everywhere you turn, there is increasing evidence that Americans don't know much about history or government or politics, the very subjects that comprise the critical realm of civics.

Let's begin with young kids. The most recent national assessment in 2014 found that only 23 percent of eighth graders scored at or above proficient in civics, and only 18 percent did so in American history.<sup>1</sup>

As for college graduates, you may have read some months ago that 10 percent of them think that Judge Judy is on the Supreme Court.<sup>2</sup>

As for adults in general, a national survey conducted in 2014 by Annenberg found that only about a third of respondents could name all three branches of

the federal government, and the same number could not name even one.<sup>3</sup>

As local government professionals, we know the importance of an educated and enlightened citizenry. We know that we will only enjoy the benefits of a democratic republic if, as Benjamin Franklin warned, we can keep it. And we know that we can only keep it if we start investing in the civic education of its keepers.

Lucky for us, myriad models and solutions for effective civic education exist. Some have been around for decades and need only for policymakers and educators to prioritize the time and resources required for their implementation.

Others are cutting edge. They are shiny, they are digital, and they are exciting. They need only greater aware-

ness of their existence, the courage for educators to adopt them, and, again, for policymakers and educators to prioritize the time and resources required for their implementation.

## Traditional Approaches

**In K–12 schools.** In 2003, the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) and the Carnegie Corporation of New

## TAKEAWAYS

- › Digital solutions can bring civics into the 21st century.
- › Local government officials are well positioned to support civic learning at all levels.

York published the report, *The Civic Mission of Schools*, in which they offered these “Six Promising Approaches to Civic Education”:

**1. Provide instruction** in government, history, law, and democracy.

**2. Incorporate discussion** of current local, national, and international issues and events in the classroom, particularly those that young people view as important to their lives.

**3. Design and implement** programs that provide students with the opportunity to apply what they learn through performing community service that is linked to the formal curriculum and classroom instruction.

**4. Offer extracurricular activities** that provide opportunities for young people to get involved in their schools or communities.

**5. Encourage student participation** in school governance.

**6. Encourage students’ participation** in simulations of democratic processes and procedures.<sup>4</sup>

The first approach serves as more of a reminder: We must teach civics! The remaining five approaches outline the ways in which we might teach it well, beginning with the incorporation of current issues discussion and followed by more experiential activities.

Three longstanding experiences embody most of these approaches: the American Legion’s Boys/Girls State program ([www.boysandgirlsstate.org](http://www.boysandgirlsstate.org)); the YMCA’s Youth in Government program ([www.ymca.net/youthandgovernment](http://www.ymca.net/youthandgovernment)); and the Center for Civic Education’s Project Citizen and We the People programs ([www.civiced.org/home](http://www.civiced.org/home)).

The American Legion’s Boys/Girls State program exposes participants to the rights, privileges, and responsibilities of

citizenship by sending high school students to their state capitals where they participate in legislative sessions, court proceedings, law enforcement presentations, and other patriotic programs.

The YMCA’s Youth in Government program has similar goals and provides similar experiences by sending students to their state legislatures. Before arriving, students conduct research and draft bills and resolutions. Once there, they simulate the entire legislative process through committee hearings, floor debate, and votes.

The Center for Civic Education’s Project Citizen and We the People programs also teach middle school and high school students, respectively, about the federal government by providing curricula, classroom resources and activities, and culminating events. More specifically, students spend a year in their social studies classes learning and preparing for local community project competitions at the middle school level and simulated congressional hearings at the high school level.

**On college campuses.** Although the “Six Promising Approaches to Civic Education” were originally envisioned for K–12 students, they are certainly applicable to the college experience. On many college campuses, robust and powerful student governments embody the final three approaches. University of Florida’s student government, as

Florida hosts an annual “Future of Florida Public Policy Summit” (<http://bobgrahamcenter.ufl.edu/students/policy-summit>).

This student-run event is open to all college students in the state of Florida and exposes participants to former government officials, professors, lobbyists, and other distinguished speakers. During the summit’s breakout sessions, students discuss improvements for the state legislature.

**In the community.** Local government officials have developed a suite of traditional practices to promote civic learning experiences at the community level. Foremost in this effort has been the personal involvement of managers who make visits to school classrooms and civic clubs.

The Center for the Urban Built Environment’s (CUBE) ([www.cubekc.org](http://www.cubekc.org)) approach to this allows local government managers to visit classrooms as consultants and demonstrate how communities are designed, often involving discussions of taxation, philanthropy, and the role of residents in the life of communities.

One activity involves students using recycled materials to build tabletop, scale-model cities in their classrooms. This tactile activity fosters serious discussions on civic responsibilities, civic spaces, and models of civic behavior.

## PEOPLE’S MISTRUST OF GOVERNMENT, WIDENING INCOME INEQUITIES, AND SOCIAL ALIENATION WITHIN OUR COMMUNITIES REQUIRE A FOCUS ON CIVIC RENEWAL IN OUR COUNTRY.

one example, currently controls a nearly \$19M budget.<sup>5</sup>

Another meaningful way in which college students experience civic learning experiences is through policy summits, model government, and general community forums. As one example, the Bob Graham Center for Public Service at the University of

Communities like Torrance, California ([www.torranceca.gov/students](http://www.torranceca.gov/students)), have worked with community civic organizations to host annual “students in government days.” These events turn local governments over to students for a day, include mock elections within schools for positions of local government leadership, and employ visits to local

government facilities in which students shadow their real-life counterparts.

Even more meaningful civic involvement for students can be achieved through participation on such formal policy-recommending bodies as the Youth Council in St. George, Utah ([www.sgutah.gov](http://www.sgutah.gov)), and Titusville, Florida's ([www.titusville.com](http://www.titusville.com)) Student Advisory Council.

Lake Oswego, Oregon ([www.ci.oswego.or.us](http://www.ci.oswego.or.us)), authorizes a dedicated youth position on all its citizen advisory committees with voting privileges to enhance weekly involvement of youth and promote more insightful decision making.

One of the most successful civic learning processes for many communities has been the rise in citizen and police academies. Cary, North Carolina ([www.townofcary.org](http://www.townofcary.org)), and Olathe, Kansas ([www.olatheks.gov](http://www.olatheks.gov)), allow youth participants to dedicate a few hours one day a week for a series of weeks to join adult residents on field visits to government facilities to learn about their community's history, government structure, and services.

Cities like Richardson, Texas ([www.cor.net](http://www.cor.net)), focus students' attention on their police departments offering a Youth Police Academy. Practical service projects involve youth in such other places as San Marcos, Texas ([www.ci.san-marcos.tx.us](http://www.ci.san-marcos.tx.us)), which adopted a youth-developed master plan.

These efforts increase civic awareness and foster future adult participation on elected or citizen advisory boards.

## Digital Solutions

**In K–12 schools.** The promising approach of encouraging students' participation in simulations of democratic processes and procedures has been made infinitely easier and more cost-efficient to implement since the advent of digital civics games.

Combining this approach with what we know about the power of games-based learning, iCivics ([www.icivics.org](http://www.icivics.org))—the educational nonprofit

founded by Retired Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor—provides a digital games-based curriculum. Its free product offerings include print-and-go lesson plans, award-winning games, and digital interactives.

As one notable example, its newly designed game, Win the White House, allows students to manage their own presidential campaign by strategically raising funds, polling voters, launching media campaigns, and making personal appearances as they move

## WITH THE EXCEPTION OF CLASSROOM TEACHERS, FEW PROFESSIONALS ARE BETTER POSITIONED TO FACILITATE CIVIC EDUCATION THAN MANAGERS.

from the primaries to the national convention and from the general election to the White House.

Another industry leader in K–12 digital solutions is BrainPOP ([www.brainpop.com](http://www.brainpop.com)), which engages students through animated movies, learning games, interactive quizzes, primary source activities, and concept mapping. It can be used in traditional, blended, and “flipped” learning settings, supporting individual, team, and whole-class learning.

Although BrainPOP features content and learning activities for multiple disciplines, its robust social studies section includes units on elections, the law, and United States government, and even features iCivics' games among its many other digital offerings.

**On college campuses.** Of the hundreds of thousands of digital applications being used by college students today, perhaps none is more indispensable to their civic engagement than TurboVote (<https://turbovote.org>). Considered the Netflix of voter registration, TurboVote is an application that makes voting easy.

It keeps track of registration and vote-by-mail rules for all 50 states so when a user signs up, TurboVote provides them up-to-date information

about their elections, both local and national, and sends them text and e-mail reminders about registration deadlines and upcoming elections. Through partnerships with many colleges and universities, TurboVote's services are free to hundreds of thousands of college students across the country.

Another powerful and digital solution to civic engagement making its mark in college communities is Code for America ([www.codeforamerica.org](http://www.codeforamerica.org)). In partnership with government partners, fellows,

and startup founders, Code for America seeks to determine how to best serve citizens through the development of innovative digital applications.

The Code for America Fellowship pairs local governments with teams of experienced technologists for one year. Together they develop and deploy powerful citizen engagement applications that seek to improve local government and enhance citizen involvement in it.

One example is Textizen ([www.textizen.com](http://www.textizen.com)), a civic dialogue platform that allows residents to connect with a powerful mix of offline outreach and online engagement.

**In the community.** Perhaps one of the most exciting outcomes of the digital revolution, particularly in the realm of digital applications, is the proliferation of applications that promote and facilitate communication between residents and their local government and elected officials.

They range from free applications that residents can download on their digital devices to more comprehensive suites of services that local governments can purchase and deploy in their communities. iCitizen ([www.icitizen.com](http://www.icitizen.com)) represents both of these approaches.

With a mission “to transform the way you communicate on civic issues, connect with your community, and promote meaningful change,” iCitizen offers a free application that connects residents to elected officials. It also partners with organizations and government officials to provide insight into what matters to their stakeholders for the purpose of promoting openness and accountability.

Another impressive application that promotes communication with local government and elected officials is Sivy (<http://sivy.io>). Sivy is a tool with the primary function of making it simpler for the average person to be able to voice his or her concerns and direct them towards the appropriate official.

Through its diverse list of features, users can find their current elected officials and contact information by typing in their zip code; raise issues and concerns with elected officials and electoral candidates in an open forum; and join like-minded people to start or sign video petitions for or against a specific issue.

Neighborland (<https://neighborland.com>) is an exciting new citizen communication application with a more action-oriented disposition. Neighborland empowers civic leaders to collaborate with residents in an accessible and participatory way by providing real-world design tools and a simple platform to engage people on the Web.

It provides tools to facilitate and encourage a four-step process by which citizens and their elected officials can enact meaningful change: 1. listen; 2. collect insights; 3. discuss and vote; and 4. take action. Neighborland has worked with numerous civic organizations in the United States, including city agencies, universities, foundations, and local nonprofits.

### Civic Learning as Career Preparation

Most local government officials come into their careers after some exposure to civic activities like scouting or 4-H, participation in classroom community projects, or involvement in social movements.

More than 1,000 college student members currently make up ICMA’s 10,000 members worldwide. ICMA has created undergraduate opportunities to explore civic involvement and career opportunities through ICMA Student Chapters ([www.icma.org/studentchapters](http://www.icma.org/studentchapters)) at some 55 universities around the country.

These chapters learn about the functions and history of local government and conduct projects promoting town-gown activities and local campus service projects. Top graduates may also serve local jurisdictions as ICMA Fellows, working on special projects as diverse as climate change, food security, or downtown revitalization.

Many state management associations also offer free student registrations to professional conferences and hold sessions where students are exposed to senior managers sharing experiences and the joys of public service.

There is no better means of giving students civic learning experiences than through internships at either the undergraduate or graduate level. Internships allow students to experience the inner workings of local government but more importantly to determine their aptitude for a career in public service.

Professional internship experiences may produce more local appointed managers; however, advocates of public service recognize that any internship experience can allow students a better understanding of local governance as a future resident or attraction to future public service as an elected official or a citizen advisory board member.

### Call to Action

Today’s local government leaders are becoming increasingly aware of the need to focus on the civic health of their communities. People’s mistrust of government, widening income inequities, and social alienation within our communities require a focus on civic renewal in our country.

Local governments are earnestly seeking to develop metrics to gauge the civic health of communities through

monitoring data regarding levels of civic participation, voting, volunteerism, and philanthropy. Civic education lies at the very heart of improving these metrics and improving community wellbeing.

With the exception of classroom teachers, few professionals are better positioned to facilitate civic education than managers. They have the legal and positional authority as well as personal influence to advance the civics agenda through support for the implementation of both traditional and newer digital strategies discussed in this article.

The ranks of retiring managers seeking encores of service also can be a powerful resource by sharing their knowledge in public schools, on college campuses, and on civic and nonprofit boards. Craig Hunter, a retired Florida county manager and bank executive, for example, volunteers his time by using his professional connections to seek local governmental internships and match students at the University of Florida with these opportunities in their hometowns.

The avenues for promoting civic education are plentiful and diverse. Whether you prefer more traditional approaches, digital solutions, or some combination of both, which we tend to recommend, there is no shortage of ideas and resources for making residents of all ages an important part of the culture and processes of your local government. **PM**

### ENDNOTES AND RESOURCES:

- 1 [http://www.nationsreportcard.gov/hgc\\_2014](http://www.nationsreportcard.gov/hgc_2014).
- 2 [http://www.goacta.org/publications/a\\_crisis\\_in\\_civic\\_education](http://www.goacta.org/publications/a_crisis_in_civic_education).
- 3 <http://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/americans-know-surprisingly-little-about-their-government-survey-finds>.
- 4 <http://www.civicmissionofschools.org/the-campaign/civic-mission-of-schools-report>.
- 5 <http://www.sg.ufl.edu/Finance>.



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