Effective civic learning begins with classroom instruction in civics, government, history, law, economics, and geography. High-quality instruction in each of these subjects (usually grouped together under the umbrella of “social studies”) provides students with both civic knowledge and the skills needed for democratic participation. While the proven practices listed later in this section are all vital to developing well-rounded democratic citizens, high-quality classroom instruction must remain at the foundation of civic learning. America’s schools impact more citizens in a more sustained way than nearly any other institution, public or private, and the classroom experience is one shared by millions of young people. The founders of American public education intended for curricula to serve a distinctly civic purpose, and it remains as important as ever that teachers, curricula, and the day-to-day academic life of schools reflect the civic mission of schools.

Of all the practices contained in this report, classroom instruction is the most common. Nearly every high school teaches history and some form of civics. There is, however, abundant evidence of a narrowing of the curriculum that causes time devoted to civics to shrink, especially in elementary school, where only one-third of schools now report “focused instruction in civics or government at the fourth grade.” The content of civics courses is often too narrow, featuring classroom instruction that is fact-based, bores students, and rarely comes across to them as essential to their future role as active, informed citizens. While students should, of course, learn the factual foundation of American democracy, understanding these foundations is not sufficient without attention to skills, values, and practical applications.

How civics is taught matters a great deal. Nearly a decade ago, the Civic Mission of Schools report set out the content of classroom instruction in civics: “All Americans should grasp a body of facts and concepts such as the fundamental principles of our democracy and Constitution; the tensions among fundamental goods and rights; the major themes in the history of the United States; the structure of our government and, the powers and limitations of its various branches and levels; the diverse values, opinions, and interests of Americans and the ways in which they are represented by elected officials, interest groups, and political parties; and the relationship between government and the other sectors of society. Studying these concepts should be seen not as rote education but as intellectually challenging and beneficial.

In this era of educational standards and accountability, the quality and quantity of classroom instruction are largely determined by three factors: state standards, assessment requirements, and curricular frameworks:

- **State Standards**: A study by the Albert Shanker Institute found that most state standards in the social studies were overwritten, emphasized a laundry list of historical facts and dates for memorization, and contained far more material to be covered than most states and districts allot for classroom time for civic learning. In social studies standards revisions since then, most states have added to the amount of material to be covered, rather than developing fewer and clearer standards that encourage an understanding of the vital importance of citizen engagement in our democracy. Standards drive textbook content, so it should not be surprising that a 2007 study...
found that “textbooks determine 75–90 percent of instructional content and activities in schools across the nation, and reviews of [civic learning] textbook materials repeatedly find them to be turgid, poorly organized, and uninteresting.”

Assessments: As of 2011, only sixteen states require meaningful assessment in the social studies—a number that has declined in the past five years as states have eliminated civics assessments. This fact, along with absence of civic learning and social studies from the required assessments in Title I of the No Child Left Behind Act (the most recent iteration of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act), sends a message that civic learning is not a priority in education policy. The lack of inclusion in priority assessment is a contributing cause to a narrowing of the curriculum that de-emphasizes the vital importance of civic learning. Moreover, detailed standards and standardized assessments discourage teacher attention to current events and local or constituency-specific issues of special importance to students in particular places or from particular backgrounds.

Narrowed Curriculum: The narrowing of the curriculum far predates No Child Left Behind. In the elementary grades, civic learning used to be woven through the curriculum, while today only slightly more than a third of teachers report covering civic topics on a regular basis. In high school, the situation is even more dire. Until the 1960s, three high school courses in civics and government were common, and two of them explored the role of citizens and encouraged students to discuss current issues. Today both of those courses are very rare. What remains is a single course on American government that usually spends little time on how people can—and why they should—participate as citizens. (While high school students are obtaining increasing numbers of credits in various social science and history electives, these courses rarely focus on what students can and should do to participate in their democracy.) The single remaining civics course is usually offered in the eleventh or twelfth grade—a move that signals that civics is an afterthought, does not allow for students to build knowledge from year to year, and completely misses the large number of students who drop out before their senior year and are most in need of education regarding their rights and responsibilities as citizens.

The current combination of assessments, standards, and requirements is not producing adequate results, even according to the overly narrow national assessment of students’ factual knowledge in civics: Three-quarters of students scored below proficient in civics on the 2010 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). To give but one example of knowledge shortfalls, only one in twelve eighth graders could give a complete response to a question about how the Constitution embodies the purposes, values, and principles of American democracy. These results are similar to those from the 1998 and 2006 NAEP administrations.

Effective civic learning must start with high-quality, engaging classroom instruction. Detailed research demonstrates what is necessary to provide effective and engaging classroom instruction. Success requires the support of policymakers and the public to ensure that proven and effective classroom practices are employed in every classroom in every school in the nation.

Proven Practice #2: Discussion of Current Events and Controversial Issues

Political controversy is ever-present in democratic nations, and that is as it should be, since controversy is an intrinsic part of the political process and is necessary for the very survival of democracy. But civic learning often fails to reflect or include such controversy. As a result, young people may not learn how to engage productively with the issues and events that animate our political system today and will continue to do so in the future.

To ensure that school-based civic learning is authentic, we need to dramatically increase the attention given to discussing controversial political issues—meaningful and
timely questions about how to address public problems. Students should learn that such issues are fundamental to the nature of a democratic society, that they can be discussed in civil and productive ways, that there are strategies for engaging in such discussion, and that these issues deserve both their own and the public's attention.

We have even more evidence now than we did a decade ago that high-quality and inclusive discussion of important current issues and events is a critical component of civic learning. Such discussion helps young people develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed for effective political and civic engagement, and it also teaches them intrinsically significant content.78 Research has added a sophisticated picture of how the most skilled teachers promote these discussions and how students experience and learn from them.79 Moreover, it is now clear that discussing current issues engages young people; numerous studies have demonstrated that students are more interested in, and say they have learned more from, civics classes that include frequent and high-quality issues discussions than those that do not.80

The need to include controversial political issues in school-based civic learning has a new urgency because of the increased vitriol of contemporary public policy discourse and migration among many American adults to ideologically homogeneous communities. As a result, many Americans increasingly talk primarily with people who share their own views, access media that reinforces their own prior beliefs, and generally confine themselves to an echo chamber of like-mindedness.81 Yet research shows that “cross-cutting” political talk—in which citizens engage in discussions about important issues and events with people who disagree—develops tolerance for others and builds understanding of the range of views about how to best solve public problems.82 Schools are particularly good venues for such discussions because they already include important deliberative assets, including student populations that reflect a greater range of ideological diversity than most people encounter in the world outside school.

Recent professional development programs that have been shown to improve teachers’ effectiveness in using issues discussions share three notable characteristics: They engage teachers in examining students’ learning (as opposed to focusing only on teachers’ practices); they provide a good mix of content and method, so that teachers develop their own understanding of issues while learning how to engage students in discussion; and they extend long enough to allow teachers the time necessary to become skilled at this kind of challenging teaching.83

Highly engaging and intellectually powerful curriculum materials that work well with students have also been developed. Some textbooks now include attention to current, controversial issues, although that is still relatively rare.84 We still need a greater number and variety of materials, including materials that focus on local, state-level issues (or state-level applications of national issues), materials for younger children, materials written at a variety of reading levels (since the reading achievement of students in a single classroom may span as much as five grades), and materials in multimedia formats. Developing materials in languages other than English is also crucial if we take seriously our obligation to provide meaningful civic learning to young immigrants.

These curricular materials require qualified teachers to carry them out, and research has shown that teachers who effectively promote discussion share a number of characteristics:

- They select issues that are important, are linked to core curricular goals, and already are, or have the potential to be, interesting to students. They can articulate to parents, administrators, and the general public their rationale for including these issues, and they can explain how instruction meets important civic and curricular goals.

- They draw from a range of discussion models to explicitly teach students the skills they need to participate.
They develop firm ground rules to ensure that discussions are inclusive and productive, and they cultivate a climate of respect and civility.

They seek out or create learning materials that provide students necessary background information, and they make sure students have thoughtfully considered multiple perspectives before discussion. Without such background and preparation, students are unlikely to engage in high-quality discussion.

They help students understand an issue or event well enough to form their own opinions, rather than pressuring students to adopt their views. They make sure that materials provide the best arguments on varying sides of an issue, that multiple points of view receive a “best case fair hearing,” and that students engage with multiple and complex perspectives.

They recognize the ethical dilemmas involved in teaching about controversial issues. For example, they understand the multiple valid reasons for and against disclosing their own point of view to students, while recognizing the inappropriateness of trying to push their views on others or belittling those who disagree.

Teaching young people how to engage in discussions of controversial political issues and important current events is a critically important component of civic learning—and one that is needed now more than ever. Although there is still much to be learned from research about this practice, it is clear that such discussions can help young people understand issues facing our society and can build skills and dispositions for thoughtfully considering future issues. Moreover, young people appreciate and enjoy the chance to take part in robust, high-quality discussions of important issues. They know that these issues are important and want to be part of the public conversation about them.

Proven Practice #3: Service-Learning

In Democracy and Education, John Dewey posits that “the conception of education as a social process and function has no definite meaning until we define the kind of society we have in mind.”85 This process of moving society toward a particular ideal requires informed, thoughtful students who are engaged in their communities beyond the classroom. They have the capacity to take action with the goal of impacting the public sphere. They view the role of citizen as active, rather than passive, engaged rather than alienated, and contributing rather than accepting.

Service-learning is an instructional methodology that makes intentional links between the academic curriculum and student work that benefits the community by providing meaningful opportunities for students to apply what they learn to issues that matter to them. Service-learning is far more than community service alone; high-quality service-learning experiences incorporate intentional opportunities for students to analyze and solve community problems through the application of knowledge and skills.

Service-learning helps to make education real, connecting academic skills and knowledge to issues that matter to young people. When students have opportunities to use the knowledge and skills they are acquiring in school to address meaningful issues in their community, the content of their learning becomes more relevant to their lives, and they better understand the importance of civic participation.

Research makes clear the positive impact of service-learning on both academic and civic outcomes. Students who benefit from quality service-learning experiences have been shown to have higher commitments to civic participation and make significantly greater gains in academic achievement than nonparticipating students. Across a number of studies conducted on service-learning programs, test scores on state assessments for students who participated in service-learning have been demonstrated to be higher in reading, writing, mathematics, social studies, and science:

Research shows that service-learning, when done well, has a positive civic impact on students’ civic knowledge, skills, dispositions, and engagement.86

Middle and high schools students in Illinois who participated in service-learning programs showed statistically significant gains in their academic engagement, academic competence, aspirations to pursue postsecondary education, acquisition of twenty-first century skills, social-emotional learning
skills such as conflict management and self-control, civic dispositions, and support for their schools. They also gained work experience and specific skills in reading, writing, math, and science.87

Elementary school students in Michigan participating in service-learning reported greater levels of behavioral, affective, and cognitive engagement in school than their nonparticipating peers, showing statistically significant differences in the effort they expended, paying attention, completing homework on time, and sharing what they learned with others. Participating students also demonstrated significantly higher test scores on the state assessment than their nonparticipating peers in the areas of writing, social studies overall, and three social studies strands: historical perspective, geographic perspective, and inquiry/decision-making.88

Middle and high school students from school districts in Ohio where teachers received funding to use service-learning practices in their classrooms outscored their peers on a number of pre/post measures. The 1,650 students in grades 6–12 who participated in service-learning had significantly higher gains than their peers on measures of academic engagement, academic competence, school attachment, aspirations, environmental stewardship, and acquisition of twenty-first century skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, and collaboration.89

Defining High-Quality Service-learning. Beyond the centrality of service-learning to developing civic skills and dispositions, as outlined above, event research has refined the definition of high-quality service-learning and showed the connections between service learning and other key educational outputs. Historically, the quality of service-learning practice has varied widely.90 Leaders in the service-learning community recently released the National K–12 Service-Learning Standards for Quality Practice, which defines what constitutes high-quality service-learning. These standards make it possible to assess and document the impact of service learning programs, as

**PROVEN PRACTICE #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.**

Service programs are now common in K–12 schools. The ones that best develop engaged citizens are linked to the curriculum:

- Consciously pursue civic outcomes, rather than seek only to improve academic performance or to promote higher self-esteem
- Allow students to engage in meaningful work on serious public issues; give students a role in choosing and designing their projects
- Provide students with opportunities to reflect on the service work
- Allow students—especially older ones—to pursue political responses to problems consistent with laws that require public schools to be nonpartisan
- See service learning as part of a broader philosophy toward education, not just a program that is adopted for a finite period in a particular course
Effective service-learning programs share the following eight traits:

1. Have sufficient duration and intensity to address community needs and meet specified outcomes.

2. Are used intentionally as an instructional strategy to meet learning goals and/or content standards.

3. Incorporate multiple challenging reflection activities that are ongoing and that prompt deep thinking and analysis about oneself and one’s relationship to society.

4. Actively engage participants in meaningful and personally relevant service activities.

5. Promote understanding of diversity and mutual respect among all participants.

6. Are collaborative, and mutually beneficial and address community needs.

7. Engage participants in an ongoing process to assess the quality of implementation and progress toward meeting specified goals and use results for improvement and sustainability.

8. Provide youth with a strong voice in planning, implementing, and evaluating service-learning experiences with guidance from adults.

Beyond these general benefits, service-learning works for students in low-income schools and communities. Schools in high-poverty areas are less likely to employ service learning as a teaching strategy. Yet research has shown this is a particularly effective pedagogy for use in such schools. In Philadelphia, for example, low-income students in service-learning classes gained more on standardized tests than their nonparticipating peers. Similar results occurred in Michigan and Texas when service learning was of high-quality. Service-learning can significantly reduce the achievement gap between affluent and low-income students. Low-income students who participated in service opportunities had better school attendance and grades than low-income students who did not participate. Despite the effectiveness of these programs, schools in high poverty areas are less likely to engage their students in service-learning experiences than their wealthier counterparts, a shortcoming that comes from inadequate teacher preparation, limited school resources, and narrowed curricula. Implementing high-quality service learning in disadvantaged communities will not only improve the civic health of those communities, but also help narrow both the academic achievement gap and the civic learning opportunity gap.

Service-Learning, Academic Achievement, and the Achievement Gap. Recent research shows that service learning has positive consequences for academic achievement. A variety of studies have shown evidence of a range of achievement-related benefits from service-learning, including improved attendance, higher grade point averages, enhanced preparation for the workforce, enhanced awareness and understanding of social issues, greater motivation for learning, and heightened engagement in prosocial behaviors. Research shows that students who participated in service-learning activities in high school were 22 percentage points more likely to graduate from college than those who did not participate, and that civic engagement activities raised the odds of graduation and improved high school students’ progress in reading, math, science, and history. The National Research Council specifically suggests the use of service-learning as an important engagement strategy for high school, implicitly recognizing that service learning incorporates many of the research-based factors associated with student engagement in academic work, better preparing them for success in college and the workplace.

Service-learning and Teacher Quality. Service-learning can significantly impact school reform efforts that seek to address teacher-quality issues. Research consistently identifies successful teachers as those who use instructional strategies that challenge students to use higher-order thinking skills, scaffold knowledge, and provide learning experiences that help students learn to transfer knowledge to new situations. These conditions are all found in quality service-learning experiences: "Teachers who use service-learning are significantly more likely to use high-quality teaching strategies like cooperative learning, participate in projects integrating technology and requiring data collection, use
primary resources, and make meaningful connections to the community, resulting in stronger impacts in a variety of academic and behavioral categories than those who don’t. 97

Part of educating for democracy includes ensuring that students understand and value the importance of each individual making positive contributions to the well-being of his or her community. To achieve this ideal, opportunities to practice the skills and habits of citizenship should be incorporated throughout students’ educational experiences—and service-learning is an extremely effective strategy for doing so.

The term extracurricular seeks to remind us that learning takes place through a broad range of activities and experiences—some in formal classroom settings and some in more informal settings, both within and outside of school. Extracurricular activities should not be viewed as peripheral to high-quality civic learning, but rather as indispensable to well-rounded civic learning.

Extracurricular activities provide forums in which students can use skills and knowledge in purposeful experiences that have both meaning and context. As one of the definitive studies on extracurricular activities notes, extracurriculars “provide opportunities to acquire and practice skills that may be useful in a wide variety of settings […] to help students to develop a sense of agency as a member of one’s community; to belong to a socially recognized and valued group, to develop support networks of peers and adults that can help in both present and future; and to experience and deal with challenges.” 98 According to some studies, school-group membership is an even better predictor of adult engagement than more commonly recognized factors such as education and income. 99

A wide range of extracurricular activities have civic benefits. Not surprisingly, explicitly civic activities such as mock trial, model congress, speech and debate, and model U.N. all have positive impacts on students’ civic knowledge and engagement. There are civic benefits to a far broader set of extracurricular activities, however. Reuben Thomas and Daniel McFarland found that participation in a wide range of extracurricular groups boosted students’ voting rates.100 In their study, many activities that require teamwork and collaboration (such as the performing arts and some sports) were especially helpful for encouraging voting.

One study, based on their extensive review of the literature, concluded that there is “good evidence that participating in extracurricular activities is associated with both short and long term indicators of positive development including school achievement and educational attainment.”101 They go on to demonstrate that extracurricular programs are most effective if they “provide opportunities to engage in challenging tasks that promote learning of valued skills; provide opportunities to form strong social bonds with adults outside of the family and like-minded peers; and provide opportunities to develop and confirm positive personal identity.”102 Finally, effective extracurricular programs must be “both intensive and long term”;103 research shows diminished effects absent sustained participation in high-quality programming.

As a strategy implemented in a variety of subject areas and for students of all ages, service-learning is not limited to a particular program and spans the boundaries of traditional history and civics courses. Whether in science or history, mathematics or language arts, service-learning can spark the civic imagination of students of all ages as they begin the lifelong habits of engaged learning and active citizenship. Given opportunities to use the knowledge and skills they learn in school to address meaningful issues in the community, students gain an understanding of the importance and benefits of civic participation and how to effectively engage in our democracy.

Proven Practice #4: Extracurricular Activities

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More specifically, research stresses the importance of three components of school-based extracurricular activities that contribute positively to school attainment. First, students should voluntarily select activities because of a genuine interest. Second, activities should be structured, organized, scheduled regularly, and led by an adult. Third,
activities should require effort on the part of the student. Given that many existing extracurricular activities already meet these criteria, schools interested in promoting civic engagement through extracurricular activities often need only to strengthen their support for existing programs.

There are two primary threats to extracurricular programs and the civic benefits that come from them. First, as funding for extracurricular programs is reduced, we should anticipate reductions in effectiveness with schools and other service providers unable to afford the full commitment that such programs require. Second, the literature suggests that the positive impact of extracurricular and after-school experiences may be undermined by policies that place low-performing students in after-school tutoring or focus on an experience that replicates or closely aligns with the traditional school program are less effective.

Given that the goal of civic learning on the whole is to prepare students for knowledgeable, engaged citizenship, extracurricular activities can serve as a vital bridge between classroom learning and the world at large. Once students have the essential knowledge that comes from classroom instruction, extracurricular activities can show them how their newly acquired knowledge is relevant in broader contexts. “The relationship between citizen and society is essential,” notes an American Bar Association report, and the goal of extracurricular activities should be to “illustrate significant connections between students and larger communities, such as town, nation, and world.”

Proven Practice #5: Student Participation in School Governance

One of the ways in which schools can prepare students for a lifetime of democratic participation is to train them in self-government within the school context. Students often have good ideas about how to improve their schools and communities as places for civic life and learning, and formal structures for considering students' views are a valuable way of modeling democratic practices and teaching students civic skills.

PROVEN PRACTICE #5: ENCOURAGE STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN SCHOOL GOVERNANCE. A long tradition of research suggests that giving students more opportunities to participate in the management of their own classrooms and schools builds their civic skills and attitudes. Thus, giving students a voice in school governance is a promising way to encourage all young people to engage civically.

Perhaps the most common form of student participation in school governance, student councils, are laboratories for practical experiences in civics and the principles of democracy. Student councils should be far more than the social planners of the school; they should instead stimulate and engage large numbers of students in school and community service activities and provide a forum for student voice on questions that impact the students themselves. In addition to civic skills and dispositions, student councils and other forums for students to participate in school government should self-consciously promote a wide range of skills and dispositions—including twenty-first century skills, financial literacy, and environmental literacy.

Research from the National Association of Student Councils notes that student participation in school governance should meet several basic tenets: Activities must be structured, students must make a substantial time commitment to activities, activities must engage student interest, and students’ decisions must have real effects. These parameters leave room for a wide range of student governance programs, but all successful programs will provide students with civic skills and dispositions that, once students graduate, will be transferrable to our democracy at large.

Beyond conventional student government (involving a few elected representatives), programs should facilitate schoolwide democratic deliberation as a way of fostering civic skills and dispositions among all students. A wide variety of programs, such as those that divide students into clusters to participate in democratic deliberation and community projects, have been shown to have positive implications on students’ civic health.

Participation in school governance has benefits for the students directly involved—such as those elected to a council—and also for their fellow students. Those who directly participate show better academic success and higher likelihood of civic participation later on, including...
In addition to the above practices, young people can also practice citizenship by playing roles in simulations. Games and other simulations contribute to civic learning by allowing young people to act in fictional environments in ways that would be impossible for them in the real world; for example, they can play the role of president of the United States or an ambassador to the United Nations. Games and simulations can be constructed so as to be highly engaging and motivating while also requiring advanced academic skills and constructive interaction with other students under challenging circumstances.

Simulations are not new, and traditional examples include mock trial and model congress—programs that continue to be popular and effective among many high school students. In addition to the obvious benefit of increased civic knowledge (about judicial and legislative processes, respectively, as well as more particular content), students learn skills with clear applicability to both civic and noncivic contexts, such as public speaking, teamwork, close reading, analytical thinking, and the ability to argue both sides of a topic. All of these are skills that prepare students both for active citizenship and for future academic and career success. Simulations that contribute to civic learning are applicable widely in the curriculum. In a history class, for example, a model constitutional convention or a mock trial based on a historically significant Supreme Court case teaches students both historical content and civic skills. In a multiplayer game called Urban Science, students play the role of city planners in their actual city. An evaluation of that program found substantial gains in knowledge, skills, and values relevant to civic engagement.

Simulations of democratic processes in the classroom enrich civics courses (as well as other courses) and ensure that the maximum number of students reap the benefits of those simulations. Simulations as extracurricular activities, such as a competitive debate team or a model congress after-school program, reach fewer students but provide the opportunity for a greater time investment and deeper learning.

Student participation in school governance provides students with civic skills that will serve them well beyond their time in school. Students who know how to make their voice heard at school will be best equipped to be active and effective in their communities at large.

In addition to the many effective types of simulations that have existed for decades, technology can also be a powerful tool for teaching students about democratic processes. In the “epistemic games” developed by David Williamson Shaffer and colleagues, computers are used to model the work environments of professionals. Students write emails, organize meetings, and do other adult tasks in pursuit of civic goals. In ICONS, students from several countries negotiate international issues. iCivics, an organization founded by Justice O’Connor, provides a whole suite of games for civic learning as well as curriculum and professional development for teachers. Some of the most recent simulations bridge the virtual and real worlds by requiring players to complete missions offline. Examples include Nuvana’s game Interrobang, in which students complete service missions, and Legislative Aide from Community Knowledge Base, in which students play aides to a fictional congresswoman in their real district and conduct real field research.

New research suggests that game narratives are beneficial to students in their ability to provide motivation and real-time feedback. Games and simulations teach both civic skills and skills that are broadly applicable. As school and district leaders look to provide their students with well-rounded civic learning, simulations of democratic processes are powerful tools.

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**Proven Practice #6: Encourage Students’ Participation in Simulations of Democratic Processes**

Recent evidence indicates that simulations of voting, trials, legislative deliberation, and diplomacy in schools can lead to heightened political knowledge and interest.