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Scholars Put Civics in Same Category as Literacy, Math

Research papers lay out obstacles, opportunities

By **Jaclyn Zubrzycki**

College-ready, career-ready ... and citizenship-ready? **Ten papers** released by the American Enterprise Institute last week make the case that civics education is as critical as literacy and mathematics. They also explore what civics education should look like, how teachers can be prepared to create educated citizens, and future challenges and opportunities in the field.

Frederick M. Hess, the director of education policy studies at the Washington-based AEI, said the research discusses "how to make teaching and learning and schooling serve the needs of America and the needs of our children today."

The research comes from scholars of various disciplines, according to David Campbell, an associate professor of political science at the University of Notre Dame and a coordinator of the research, which was released at a conference last week. "We want to build a community of scholars working on this issue," he said.

One theme of the research is that civics skills and dispositions, like those of reading and math, can be evaluated, and that there are lessons to be learned from places that teach them well.

Data have shown that some private and charter schools imbue civic values with greater success than regular public schools, Mr. Campbell writes in one paper. Even though the data have come to light several times, he said, there has been little attempt to learn from those schools' strengths, such as a schoolwide ethos of civic responsibility, to improve public schools.

Peter Levine, the research director of Tufts University's Jonathan M. Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service, points to other models of strong civics education in another paper.

"If you ask the average person what they think is going on with civics education," he says, "they'll say, 'They don't teach this anymore the way they did when I was a kid.' " They're right, Mr. Levine said in an interview, but the major difference is not a lack of knowledge about such facts as the branches of government, but the decline of applied skills, such as "being able to understand the news and form one's own opinions about the news, and being able to affect one's community in a productive way."

In his research, Keith C. Barton, an education professor at Indiana University, argues that preservice teachers need to expand their understanding of their roles as teachers. He writes that teachers must model and teach civic engagement, and that while teacher-preparation programs can help inculcate those values and skills, most don't.

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Diana Hess and John Zola expand on that theme in another work, giving case studies of teachers provided with excellent professional development to promote civic education and a checklist for effective professional development.

But it's not only teachers who need to recalibrate expectations about civics education, said Meira Levinson, an associate professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and a coordinator of the research. Teachers often worry that treating contentious issues in class might make them vulnerable to criticism from the community, she said.

Digital Divide

While students may not be satisfactorily engaged in civics, they are quite engaged in digital media, and that engagement provides an opportunity for educators, researchers Joseph Kahne, Jacqueline Ullman, and Ellen Middaugh write in a paper on digital opportunities.

"Frequently, we think of digital media as a distraction and a risk, but it is a potential bridge between what students find engaging and what they need to know," Mr. Kahne said in an interview. Several organizations, such as the Chicago-based **Youmedia** and retired U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor's **iCivics**, are already taking advantage of that bridge.

That trio of researchers also described a civics achievement gap, pointing to a dramatic digital divide between advantaged and disadvantaged students. The discrepancy in scores between advantaged and disadvantaged students on such tests as the National Assessment of Educational Progress in civics is also large—larger than the gap in reading or math scores, said Seth Andrew, the executive director of **Democracy Prep**, a charter school network.

David Feith, the editor of *Teaching America: The Case for Civic Education*, which was published last month, said the gap is particularly worrisome for students who already feel disenfranchised: "If you say that something so basic to citizenship [as civics education] is a luxury, you're already starting at a point of low expectations."

The AEI's Mr. Hess, who also writes an **opinion blog** for *Education Week*, said the collection of papers wasn't designed to solve every problem, but to present ideas and "nudge public attention" toward a critical issue.

The papers are slated for publication by the Harvard Education Press next year.