

## Research and Practice

# High Quality Civic Education: What Is It and Who Gets It?

Joseph Kahne and Ellen Middaugh

**Interviewer:** *What are your feelings about government and politics?*

**Boy's voice:** *It's boring.*

**Interviewer:** *When you say it's boring, what's boring about it?*

**Boy's Voice:** *The subject matter.*

**Girl's Voice:** *Yes, very true.*

**Boy's Voice:** *It's not just the work. It's what the work is about. We don't care about it.*

—Focus group of high school seniors in a traditional government classroom

It is commonly understood that democratic self-governance requires an informed and educated citizenry and that access to education is an important support for the development of such citizens. Civic education, however, which explicitly teaches the knowledge, skills and values believed necessary for democratic citizenship, currently holds a tenuous position in American public schools. It was common in the 1960s for students to take multiple courses in civics cover-

*“Research and Practice,” established early in 2001, features educational research that is directly relevant to the work of classroom teachers. In this, the 20th article in the series, I invited Joseph Kahne and Ellen Middaugh to report on the current status of high-quality civic education in the U.S.—what defines it and who gets it.*

—Walter C. Parker, “Research and Practice” Editor,  
University of Washington, Seattle.

ing not only the structure of American government but also the role of citizens and the issues they and the government face. Students today, however, typically take only one semester-long course on American government.<sup>1</sup> These courses tend to focus on factual knowledge of American government (e.g. contents of the Constitution and branches of government) and give considerably less attention to the role of common citizen.<sup>2</sup>

What brought about this retreat from civic curricula? Any change in educational practice is likely the result of a number of influences. However, two important challenges to civic education seem particularly relevant for understanding why it is such a small part of public schooling today and whether greater attention to the subject is warranted.

One challenge is the belief by some that civics instruction is relatively less important than, and takes time away from, subjects such as math, science

and reading. Indeed, the now famous 1983 report *A Nation at Risk* identified increasing pressures on schools to “provide solutions to personal, social, and political problems” as a core threat to providing quality education.<sup>3</sup> The authors acknowledge the importance of an educated citizenry for democracy, but focus on the need to develop general skills such as literacy, critical thinking, and labor market skills rather than skills, knowledge, and thinking specific to civic participation and deliberation. This position has been increasingly evident in educational policy. Most notably, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 requires schools to conduct assessments in math, reading/language arts, and science only. The accountability measures tied to these assessments suggest that little importance is placed on civic outcomes. It is not surprising, then, that civics courses have fallen by the wayside. Indeed, a 2006 study by the Center on Education policy found that 71% of districts reported

cutting back time on other subjects to make more space for reading and math instruction.<sup>4</sup> Social studies was the part of the curriculum that was most frequently cited as the place where these reductions occurred.

While recent analyses of national tests of academic achievement suggest that some important gains have been made since 1990, these gains appear primarily in the area of math and only for younger students.<sup>5</sup> In spite of pressures to focus on curricular areas of math and reading, we see “little or no progress in reading achievement since 1990” and little to no improvement for reading or math among high school students.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, numerous studies have found that levels of informed civic engagement are lower than desirable, and in many cases, are declining.<sup>7</sup> As a panel of experts convened by the American Political Science Association recently found, “Citizens participate in public affairs less frequently, with less knowledge, and enthusiasm, in fewer venues, and less equitably than is healthy for a vibrant democratic polity.”<sup>8</sup>

For example, voting rates of those under age 25 in U.S. presidential elections have declined steadily from 52% to 37% between 1972 (the first election when 18 year-olds were given the right to vote in a presidential election) and 2000.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, youth interest in discussing political issues declined to their lowest levels since historic highs in the 1960’s.<sup>10</sup> Roughly 25% of young people from 1960-1976 reported that they followed public affairs most of the time, but by 2000, that number had declined to 5%.<sup>11</sup> Although young people’s voting rates increased somewhat in the November 2004 elections in the United States, youth voters remained roughly the same proportion of the total electorate.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, it is unclear whether this up-tick in turnout will be sustained, and more importantly, whether it will be accompanied by increases in students’ knowledge and interest in following politics. As important as voting may be, informed and educated voting is more important.

Given the overall low levels of youth commitment to and capacity for political participation, it is clear that many young people are not having experiences in or out of school that support their development into informed and effective citizens. With this in mind, we address the second challenge to civic education—the question of whether civics classes can be effective for encouraging the development of youth civic commitments and capacities.

Early evaluations of the impact of high school government courses found little relationship between exposure to such curriculum and youth political orientations, casting considerable doubt on their effectiveness.<sup>13</sup> These studies, however, focused on U.S. government courses and civics courses in general, with little attention to differences in quality. Indeed, Langton and Jennings note that in spite of their findings about the general effects of government courses, “there is reason to believe that under special conditions, exposure to government and politics courses does have an impact at the secondary level.”<sup>14</sup> Uncovering what these “special conditions” might be and figuring out how to make them more typical has become the focus of some recent research and related educational practice and policy work.

The purpose of this article is to share a model of high quality civic education and the research base that supports it. Using this model, we then examine the extent to which high quality civic education is available to students across a diverse set of schools in the state of California.

### **A Model of High Quality Civic Education**

In response to doubts about whether civic education can have a substantial impact on youth civic and political engagement, some scholars have focused their attention on understanding how youth who are active and engaged became that way and, in turn, how schools might incorporate that knowledge to provide better quality civic education.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps the most thorough treatment of this issue is undertaken by James Youniss and Miranda Yates, whose

work provides a conceptualization of the factors that promote the development of a civic identity.<sup>16</sup> Drawing on Erik Erikson’s *Identity, Youth, and Crisis*, Youniss and Yates argue that a prime task of late adolescence is the development of a social identity that embraces an orientation towards civic and political participation.<sup>17</sup> As they state, “Gaining a sense of agency and feeling responsible for addressing society’s problems are distinguishing elements that mark mature social identity.”<sup>18</sup> They also identify three kinds of opportunities that can spur such development: opportunities for agency and industry, for social relatedness, and for the development of political-moral understandings. Their model was designed to help explain how various kinds of service-learning experiences can promote a sense of social responsibility in youth.

In an earlier study with Joel Westheimer, we adapted this framework from service learning specifically to civic education generally.<sup>19</sup> Our reasoning was that a “mature social identity” that supports civic engagement can be fostered by opportunities that develop students’ sense of their civic and political capacities, connections, and commitments. While the terminology is more specific to civic education, the framework is the same. Our model (see Figure 1) assumes that students’ broad commitment to civic participation will be enhanced when they develop the sense that they have the *capacity* to be effective as civic actors, when they feel *connected* to groups and other individuals who share their commitments and/or can facilitate their involvement and effectiveness as civic actors, and when they have formed particular and strong *commitments* with respect to specific social issues.

The model also provides a way to understand how curricular experiences can foster broad civic commitments by developing students’ sense of their civic capacities, connections, and commitments to particular issues. For example, opportunities to learn about ways to improve the community might reasonably be expected to foster a sense of civic capacity. Meeting civically-active

role models and participating in service projects might be expected to foster a sense of civic connection. And learning about social problems or discussing current events might be expected to foster commitments to particular societal issues. Moreover, some opportunities, depending on how they are structured, might be expected to foster more than one of these intermediary outcomes.

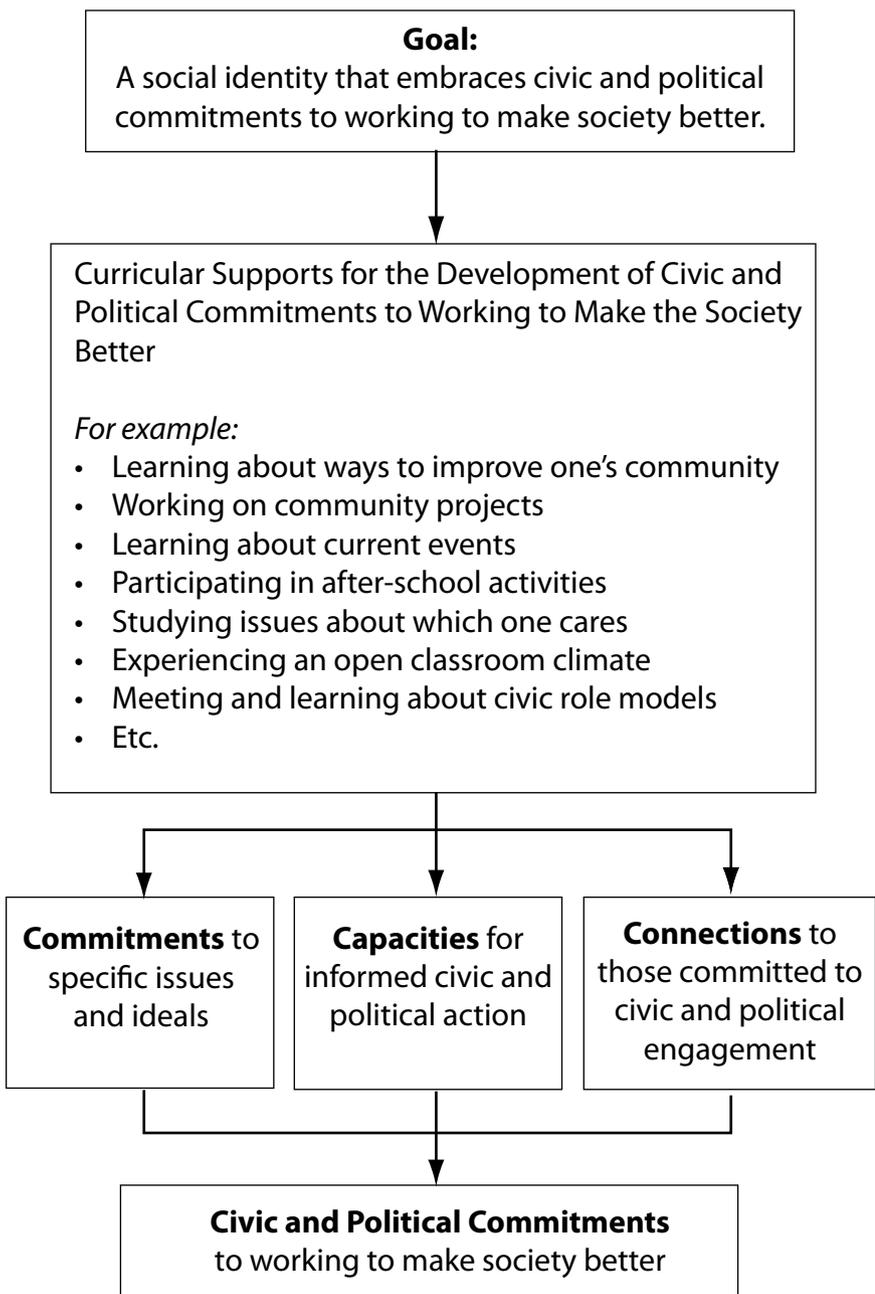
### Experiences that Foster Civic and Political Commitments and Capacities

Prior studies have found that the quantity of civic education bears little relationship to young people’s later civic and political activity. Yet, when studies focus on practices that align with the model of high quality civic education just described, the results are more promising. Indeed,

recent research has found a fairly broad variety of school-based opportunities (the “curricular supports” in our model) that are related to increased levels of civic and political commitments, capacities, and activities amongst youth. A consensus statement from leaders in the field identified six promising practices research has found to be related to higher levels of students’ civic or political commitment, knowledge, skills and activities. These include information about the local, state, and national government; opportunities to debate and discuss current events and other issues that matter to students; service-learning opportunities; experiences with extra curricular activities; opportunities for youth decision making; and engaging in simulations of civic processes.<sup>20</sup> Other researchers have identified additional practices such as open classroom environments and controversial issue discussions.<sup>21</sup>

Currently, much of the research is correlational, leaving open the question of whether these experiences *lead to* greater civic commitments and capacities or are *sought out* by students who are already interested in civic and political engagement. However, some recent studies that used pre/post designs and control groups have begun to address this concern. These studies have focused on particular curricular initiatives such as service learning, examining upcoming elections, and experience-based curriculum for high school government courses.<sup>22</sup> In addition, we recently completed a large-scale longitudinal study that, unlike prior large-scale studies, examined multiple civic learning opportunities associated with best practice and controlled for students’ prior civic commitments. We found that meeting civic role models, learning about problems in society, learning about ways to improve one’s community, having service-learning experiences, being required to keep up with politics and government, being engaged in open classroom discussions, and studying topics about which the student cares, all promoted commitments to civic participation among high school students. And the magnitude of this impact was substantial. We found

**Figure 1.**



**We also found that high school seniors who did not expect to take part in any form of post-secondary education reported significantly fewer opportunities to develop civic and political capacities and commitments than those with post-secondary plans.**

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that if schools could increase their provision of these opportunities, then they could more than offset differences in civic engagement caused by differences in opportunities in students' home environments.<sup>23</sup>

**What Kinds of Experiences with Civic Opportunities do High School Students Typically Have?**

Given the evidence that some school-based opportunities foster adolescents' civic commitments and capacities at a time in their lives when they are forming their own civic and political identity, it makes sense to examine the extent to which high school students typically have access to these kinds of opportunities. To address this question, we surveyed a sample of 2,366 California high school students to find out how frequently they experienced the kinds of opportunities that supported the development of committed, informed, and effective citizens. The findings suggest that students' access to these opportunities is uneven. Some opportunities are more common than others, and some students are more likely than others to be afforded them.

When we asked students how often they had each of the civic opportunities detailed in Figure 1, the most common answer was, "a little."<sup>24</sup> And sometimes, for some students, these desired opportunities don't occur at all. For example, when asked how much of a chance students had to say how they think the school should be run, 36% said "not at all." Thirty-six percent also reported never having the opportunity to participate in simulations or role-plays during high school. And 34% report never being

part of a service-learning project while in high school. Clearly, one need not have these experiences as part of every class, but sizable numbers of students are not getting these opportunities at all.

While the overall portrait suggests that many students have little experience with a number of the opportunities, there were some bright spots. In particular, students were more likely to report frequent experiences with learning about how government works (68%), discussing current events (58%) and being in classrooms where a wide range of student views were discussed (68%).

**Unequal Access to Opportunities**

It is inevitable that students will have different opportunities with respect to promoting civic development depending on the teachers they happen to have for particular subjects. It should not be the case, however, that these opportunities are distributed on the basis of characteristics such as race or class, or academic standing. Unfortunately, there is evidence that these kinds of systemic inequalities exist. Our study of high school seniors in California revealed differences in access to opportunities related to race and ethnicity—even when we controlled for students' different academic performance and future educational goals.<sup>25</sup>

Specifically, even with other controls in place, students who identified as African Americans were less likely than others to report having civically-oriented government courses, less likely to report having discussions of current events that were personally relevant, less likely to report having voice in the

school or classroom, and were less likely to report opportunities for role plays or simulations.<sup>26</sup> Students who identified as Asian reported more participation in after-school activities and more voice in the school than others, but less open discussion in the classroom. Students who identified themselves as Latino reported fewer opportunities for service than others and fewer experiences with role plays and simulations. Students identifying as White were more likely than others to report having civically-oriented government courses and were more likely to report having voice in the classroom. We also found that high school seniors who did not expect to take part in any form of post-secondary education reported significantly fewer opportunities to develop civic and political capacities and commitments than those with post-secondary plans. Indeed, the quantity of opportunities provided for students was strongly related to the amount of post-secondary education a student expected to receive.<sup>27</sup>

A large body of evidence demonstrates that significant differences exist between various groups of adults with respect to their engagement and influence in the political system. When explaining these differences, most researchers emphasize factors such as an individual's income, level of education, and race; they do not consider the role that *schools* may play in exacerbating that inequality by providing fewer civic learning opportunities to that same group of students.<sup>28</sup> Though the magnitude of such school effects in relation to other factors is not yet clear, it does appear that schools may well increase rather than decrease inequalities related to civic and political participation.

**Conclusion: Moving towards High Quality Civic Education for All Students**

There are many indications that the level of student civic and political commitments and capacities is less than desirable for a democratic society and that, in many cases, it is declining. There is also considerable evidence that educators can

help by providing a particular set of civic learning opportunities. When schools provide the kinds of opportunities that allow students to learn and practice a variety of civic skills, learn about how government works, see how others engage civically and politically, and grapple with their own roles as future citizens, then we see increases in both students' commitment to and capacity for future participation. Indeed, the promise of these civic learning opportunities makes clear the significant cost of policies that crowd out attention to the preparation of citizens and therefore diminish attention to these practices.

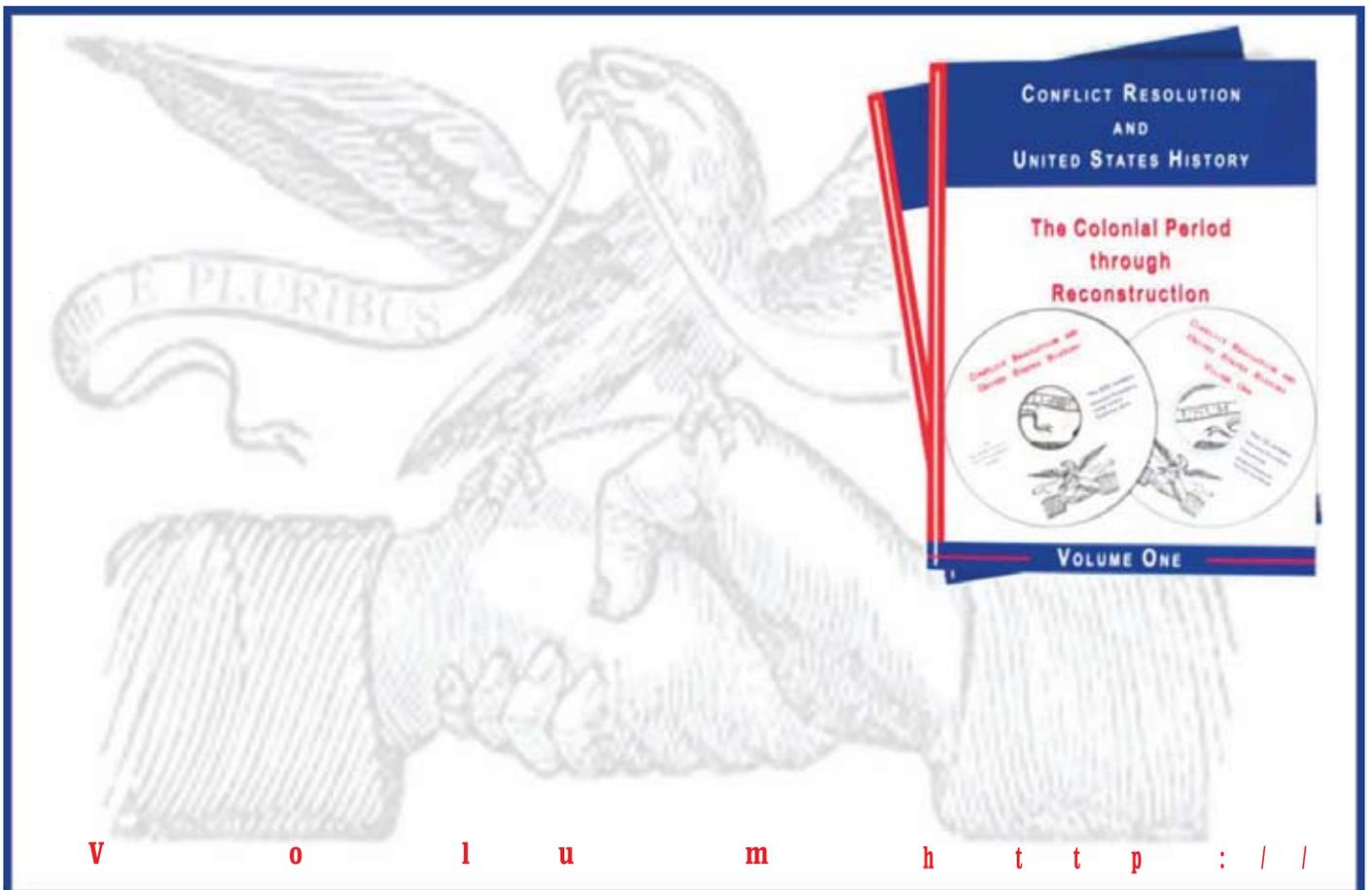
We believe these civic learning opportunities may be important later in life, but *are particularly important at the high school level*. Not only is high school the last period when young people in America are guaranteed access to free education, and to civic education (when it is included), but it is a time when many are making important decisions about their future and their relationship to the world. Unfortunately, many students,

particularly those who are not planning to seek further education and those who are members of politically underrepresented racial and ethnic groups, report few experiences with the kinds of opportunities that have been found to be most effective.

At the same time, however, we are also aware that there is much more that we still must learn. Not all findings regarding the impact of civic learning opportunities have been positive, and there is reason to believe that the varied quality of these opportunities can alter their impact. For example, some studies that control for prior commitments find significant positive effects only for "high quality" service learning.<sup>29</sup> In addition, recent studies indicate that varied civic learning opportunities may impact young people of different races and social classes in differing ways. For example, our recent qualitative study of high school students in different social contexts in California suggests that, while the majority of students in our sample had little interest in poli-

tics, youth from high income, majority white communities were more likely to view political engagement as effective, but less likely to view these activities as necessary or important compared to their counterparts from a primarily working-class, Latino community.<sup>30</sup> These differences in perception are likely to influence how students perceive and make use of opportunities for civic education provided by the schools. Indeed, Rubin found that middle and high school students from privileged, homogeneous environments were more likely to experience the ideals expressed in civic texts as congruous with their daily experiences than were urban youth of color.<sup>31</sup> Further studies are needed to better understand how prior experiences with and assumptions about the functioning of U.S. democracy influence students' perceptions of and outcomes related to civic education.

Moreover, not all who rally behind the banner of democratic citizenship value the same outcomes. Some emphasize knowledge, while others place a



premium on participation, on critical analysis, on personal responsibility, on tolerance, or other priorities. And, not surprisingly, studies have found that different practices, and the ways that different practices are used, may promote different capacities and commitments related to democratic citizenship.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, even though it is increasingly clear that a range of “best practices” can promote desired civic outcomes, we still have much to learn about how the quality of these practices along with the social contexts in which they are implemented influence their impact. If our democracy is to better fulfill its promise of enabling all citizens to participate fully and as equals, it is also clear that we must do more to understand why schools often fail to provide equal access to civic learning opportunities and how educators can address this shortcoming. 

#### Notes

1. R. Niemi and J. Smith, “Enrollments in High School Government Classes: Are We Short-Changing Both Citizenship and Political Science Training?” *Political Science and Politics* 34, no. 2 (June 2001): 281-287.
2. P. Levine and M. Lopez, *Themes Emphasized in Social Studies and Civics Classes: New Evidence* (Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, CIRCLE, 2004).
3. National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1983), 1.
4. Center on Education Policy, *From the Capital to the Classroom: Year Four of the No Child Left Behind Act* (Washington, D.C.: Center on Education Policy, 2006).
5. T. Loveless, *The 2006 Brown Center Report on American Education: How Well Are American Students Learning?* Vol. 2, no. 1 (Washington D.C.: The Brookings Institution, October 2006).
6. *Ibid.*, 9.
7. National Conference on Citizenship, *America's Civic Health Index: Broken Engagement* (A Report by the National Conference on Citizenship in Association with CIRCLE and Saguaro Seminar, 2006); R. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).
8. S. Macedo et al., *Democracy at Risk: How Political Choices Undermine Citizen Participation, and What We Can Do About It* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2005).
9. P. Levine and M.H. Lopez, *Youth Voter Turnout Has Declined, By Any Measure* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, 2002).
10. L. J. Sax, “Citizenship Development and the American College Student,” in *Civic Responsibility and Higher Education*, ed. T. Ehrlich. (Phoenix, Ariz.: Oryx Press, 2000), 3-18.
11. C. Gibson and P. Levine, *The Civic Mission of Schools* (New York and Washington, D.C.: The Carnegie

- Corporation of New York and the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, 2003).
12. See P. Levine and M. Lopez, *Themes Emphasized in Social Studies and Civics Classes: New Evidence*. (Washington, D.C.: Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, 2004); In response to these signs of declining interest, some observers (and, in particular, youth from this generation) have argued that young people are participating in new “non-traditional” ways (S. Long, *The New Student Politics: The Wingspread Statement on Student Civic Engagement*. Providence, R.I.: The Campus Compact, 2002). In addition to citing increasing rates of volunteerism, proponents of this view argue that youth participation is often informal and grass-roots, and that youth acquire information through alternative means such as the Internet. While forms of civic and political engagement will vary by generation, a systematic qualitative study of young people that investigated this contention did not find evidence to support it (M.W. Andolina, K. Jenkins, S. Keeter, and C. Zukin, “Searching for the Meaning of Youth Civic Engagement: Notes From The Field,” *Applied Developmental Science* 6, no. 4 (2002): 189-195). Clearly, more work in the area of new forms of civic participation is needed.
  13. K. Langton and M.K. Jennings, “Political Socialization and the High School Civic Curriculum in the United States,” *American Political Science Review* 62 (1968): 862-67.
  14. *Ibid.*, 866.
  15. The terms “civic” and “political” have been differentiated in varied ways. Sherrod, Flanagan, and Youniss, in “Editors’ Note,” *Applied Developmental Science* 6, no. 4 (2002), 173-174, describe “political” as referring to “affairs of the state or the business of government” and “civic” as referring to membership in a polity or community.
  16. J. Youniss and M. Yates, *Community Service and Social Responsibility in Youth* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1997).
  17. Erik H. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1968).
  18. Youniss and Yates, 36.
  19. J. Kahne and J. Westheimer, “Teaching Democracy: What Schools Need To Do,” *Phi Delta Kappan* 85, no. 1 (2003), 34-40, 557-66.
  20. See Gibson and Levine, 2003.
  21. J. Torney-Purta, “The School’s Role in Developing Civic Engagement: A Study of Adolescents in Twenty-Eight Countries,” *Applied Developmental Science* 6(2002): 203-212; D. Hess, “Discussing Controversial Public Issues in Secondary Social Studies Classrooms: Learning from Skilled Teachers” (University of Washington Ph.D. Dissertation, 1998); Hess, “How Students Experience and Learn from the Discussion of Controversial Public Issues in Secondary Social Studies,” *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision* 17, no. 4 (2002): 283-314.
  22. E.C. Metz and J. Youniss, “Longitudinal Gains in Civic Development through School-Based Required Service,” *Political Psychology* 26, no. 3 (2005): 413-438; M. McDevitt and S. Kiouisis, “Education for Deliberative Democracy: The Long-Term Influence of Kids Voting” (Working Paper #22, Center for Information and Research on Civic Engagement: University of Maryland, 2004); J. Kahne, B. Chi, and E. Middaugh, “Building Social Capital for Civic and Political Engagement: The Potential of High School Civics Courses,” *Canadian Journal of Education* 29, no. 2 (2006) 387-409.
  23. J. Kahne and S. Sporte, “Developing Citizens: The Impact of Civic Learning Opportunities on Students’ Commitment to Civic Participation.” (Under review. For working paper see: [www.civicsurvey.org/](http://www.civicsurvey.org/)

- [Democratic\\_Education\\_Reports\\_%26\\_Publications\\_.html](http://Democratic_Education_Reports_%26_Publications_.html))
24. This finding is consistent with the recent multi-nation study by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) which found that 90% of U.S. students said that they most commonly spent time reading textbooks and doing worksheets (Baldi, S., M. Perie, D. Skidmore, E. Greenberg, and C. Hahn, *What Democracy Means to Ninth Graders: U.S. Results from the International IEA Civic Education Study* [Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2001]).
  25. J. Kahne and E. Middaugh, “Democracy for Some: The Civic Opportunity Gap in High School” (Under review. For working paper see: [www.civicsurvey.org/Democratic\\_Education\\_Reports\\_%26\\_Publications\\_.html](http://www.civicsurvey.org/Democratic_Education_Reports_%26_Publications_.html))
  26. For example, government courses where teachers emphasize the importance of individual citizens staying informed and acting on issues that are relevant to them.
  27. Kahne and Middaugh, 2005.
  28. See N.H. Nie, J. Junn, and K. Stehlik-Barry, *Education and Democratic Citizenship in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); S. Verba, K.L. Schlozman, and H.E. Brady, *Voice and Equality: Civic Volunteerism in American Politics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995); S.K. Ramakrishnan and M. Baldassare, *Ties that Bind: Changing Demographics and Civic Engagement in California* (San Francisco: Public Policy Institute of California, 2004).
  29. See S. Billig, S. Root, and D. Jesse, *The Impact of Participation in Service Learning on High School*

- Students’ Civic Engagement*, CIRCLE Working Paper 33 (Washington, D.C.: Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, 2005); A. Melchior, *Final Report: National Evaluation of Learn and Serve America and Community-based Programs* (Center for Human Resources, Brandeis University: 1998).
30. E. Middaugh and J. Kahne, “Civic Development in Context: The Influence of Local Contexts on High School Students’ Beliefs about Civic Engagement” in *Educating Citizens for Troubled Times: Qualitative Studies of Current Efforts*, eds. J. Bixby and J. Pace (In Press, Albany: SUNY Press).
  31. B. Rubin, “‘There’s Still Not Justice’: Youth Civic Identity Development Amid Distinct School and Community Contexts,” *Teacher’s College Record* 109, no. 7 (2007), [www.tcrecord.org](http://www.tcrecord.org) ID # 127771, accessed on 10/16/2006.
  32. J. Westheimer and J. Kahne, “What Kind of Citizen? The Politics of Educating for Democracy,” *American Educational Research Journal* 41, no. 2. (Summer 2004): 237-269; J. Torney-Purta and W.K. Richardson, “Trust in Government and Civic Engagement among Adolescents in Australia, England, Greece, Norway and the United States” (Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Boston, Mass., 2002).

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