Presidential elections provide unparalleled opportunities to broaden students’ civic engagement. Especially this year, young people have pressed candidates to attend to issues they care about. Primary turnout figures indicated high youth voter engagement—potentially a good sign for America’s future civic health, which is characterized by citizens participating in civic and political life and caring for community and each other. A democracy’s leaders will only be accountable if its citizens are willing to hold them accountable.

Studies show that civic health is a key factor in a community’s economic health. Consequently, the K-12 civic education
that all citizens receive is essential to ensuring a prosperous democratic society.

But here’s a challenge. While voting is an important indicator of civic engagement, voter turnout by itself is not a great benchmark of civic health. In fact, higher average turnout can mask widening civic disparities. Voter turnout among youth varied drastically by education, income, race/ethnicity, and gender in 2012 (see figure). For example, four of every five young, black, college-educated high-income single women voted. Only one in five young Latina women without high school degrees did the same. And one in seven young, white, low-income women with less than high school education voted.

One way to combat the persistent large civic participation gap is to provide high-quality civic education to all K-12 students. But what does the term civic education mean in the K-12 setting? Broadly, civic education includes any and all processes that prepare members of a community for civic life. K-12 civic education today is largely centered in social studies courses and supported by other disciplines and out-of-classroom learning opportunities.

Ideally, K-12 civic education would fully prepare young people to participate in myriad aspects of civic life: voting, volunteering, deliberating on issues, and advocating for a cause, for starters. Acquiring these skills begins with a solid grasp of foundational knowledge. But it also requires students to experience civic engagement through experiential learning—service learning, community-engaged research, and nonpartisan electoral activities—that facilitate and encourage real-life civic participation. Young people have always needed knowledge, skills, and dispositions to make informed, ethical decisions. This era of political gridlock, negative campaign ads, and personal attacks on candidates only under scores that need.

In my view, civic education is incomplete if it is measured only by acquisition of rote knowledge about the Constitution and the founding of the country, as some states have recently started to do by requiring high school students to pass the US Citizenship and Immigration Service Naturalization Test. Civic education that promotes civic engagement goes further—helping all students develop a sense of efficacy and civic duty. And because K-12 schools

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**Figure 1. Turnout Varies by Group Among Youth**

- Asian-American male, 18-29, with College Experience
- Black Non-Hispanic, 18-29, Any College, Male
- White Non-Hispanic, Income Less Than $35k, 18-29, LTHS, Single Men
- Latino, of any race, 18-29, LTHS, Female
- White Non-Hispanic, Income Less Than $35k, 18-29, THS, Single Women
- Black Non-Hispanic, Income $75k and Up, 18-29, with College Exp, Single Women

reach so many more students than colleges do, together they have a real shot at narrowing the civic participation gap.

Studies consistently find that the kinds of civic learning experiences that promote civic readiness are distributed in favor of affluent students. West found that the more time schools spent on test prep for math and reading, the less time students spent in social studies. Within the same school and with the same teacher, social studies instruction can vary drastically. My analysis of teacher survey data showed that the same teachers use more interactive pedagogical techniques when teaching an AP or honors course than a required civics course.

High-Quality Civic Education Works

High-quality civic education not only prepares children for the most basic civic participation—voting and understanding how powers are divided—but also helps them acquire broader skills, such as deliberating with fellow citizens to make difficult decisions that affect their communities, advocating for themselves and others on matters of public relevance, and understanding how they can contribute to collective civic health.

Strong civic education has long-term consequences. When we asked young adults what kinds of civic education practices they were exposed to in high school, we found that the more they were exposed to best practices, the more likely they were to be engaged in voting and community service. A large study of Chicago public school students found that having good “civic learning opportunities” increased adolescents’ commitment to civic engagement. A number of studies have found benefits from discussion of controversial issues in classrooms and participation in extracurricular groups.

High-quality civic education also appears to contribute to students’ college and career readiness. A rigorous study found that students who were exposed to service learning were more likely to go to college than those who did not. Furthermore, when done well, civic learning promotes exactly the skills that employers want in the modern labor market, such as collaboration, communication, and critical thinking.

Civic Education Beyond Social Studies Class

While the importance of classroom instruction in civics could never be overstated, civic learning ought to be part of every discipline and most school activities. This becomes possible when schools and teachers view civic education not just as acquisition of factual information about the nation’s founding principles and government structures but as how students experience and practice democracy in their daily lives.

What will civic learning look like in a science class or in a cafeteria? It’s perhaps not so much what students do as how they learn to frame what they are learning. For example, science projects strengthen students’ grasp of scientific principles and how to carry out scientific inquiries. When civic learning is infused into a science course, students may also engage in dialogues about the potential public purpose of these science projects and how decisions about scientific innovations must encompass a host of external factors. In a cafeteria, students can engage in lively discussions about which healthy meal options should be available and how to make collective decisions that account for multiple perspectives.

Scaling Up Best Practices for All Students

The verdict is clear on what effective civic education practices can do, and there have always been examples of excellence, even in less-than-ideal conditions. Yet in most cases, students in underresourced schools do not experience these excellent practices.

CIRCLE, a Tufts University–based nonpartisan think tank that promotes equitable civic learning and engagement through research and capacity building, convened a cross-disciplinary panel of experts, practitioners, and policymakers in 2012. The panel deliberated on ways to improve US civic education, taking into account survey and interview data, as well as policy scans. Three major recommendations emerged from the resulting report of the Commission for Youth Civic Knowledge and Voting that are especially relevant here:

- State standards for civics should call for advanced civic skills “such as deliberation and collaboration rather than memorizing facts.”
### Table 1. Illinois Learning Standards for Social Science, Grades 9-12

#### INQUIRY SKILLS

**Developing Questions and Planning Inquiries**

**Constructing Essential Questions**  
**SS.IS.1.9-12:** Address essential questions that reflect an enduring issue in the field.

**Constructing Supporting Questions**  
**SS.IS.2.9-12:** Explain how supporting questions contribute to an inquiry.

**Determining Helpful Sources**  
**SS.IS.3.9-12:** Develop new supporting and essential questions through investigations, collaboration, and using diverse sources.

#### Evaluating Sources and Using Evidence

**Gathering and Evaluating Sources**  
**SS.IS.4.9-12:** Gather and evaluate information from multiple sources while considering the origin, credibility, point of view, authority, structure, context, and corroborative value of the sources.

**Developing Claims and Using Evidence**  
**SS.IS.5.9-12:** Identify evidence that draws information from multiple sources to revise or strengthen claims.

#### Communicating Conclusions and Taking Informed Action

**Critiquing Conclusions**  
**SS.IS.7.9-12:** Articulate explanations and arguments to a targeted audience in diverse settings.

**Taking Informed Action**  
**SS.IS.8.9-12:** Use interdisciplinary lenses to analyze the causes and effects of and identify solutions to local, regional, or global concerns.  
**SS.IS.9.9-12:** Use deliberative processes and apply democratic strategies and procedures to address local, regional, or global concerns and take action in or out of school.

### Table 2. Content Standards for Illinois Civics, Grades 9-12

#### CIVICS STANDARDS

**Civic and Political Institutions**

**SS.CV.1.9-12:** Distinguish the rights, roles, powers, and responsibilities of individuals and institutions in the political system.

**SS.CV.2.9-12:** Evaluate the opportunities and limitations of participation in elections, voting, and electoral process.

**SS.CV.3.9-12:** Analyze the impact of constitutions, laws, and agreements on the maintenance of order, justice, equality and liberty.

**SS.CV.4.9-12:** Explain how the US Constitution established a system of government that has powers, responsibilities, and limits that have changed over time and are still contested while promoting the common good and protecting rights.

**Participation and Deliberation: Applying Civic Virtues and Democratic Principles**

**SS.CV.5.9-12:** Analyze the impact of personal interest and diverse perspectives on the application of civic dispositions, democratic principles, constitutional rights, and human rights.

**SS.CV.6.9-12:** Describe how political parties, the media, and public interest groups both influence and reflect social and political interests.

**SS.CV.7.9-12:** Describe the concepts and principles that are inherent to American Constitutional Democracy.

**Processes, Rules and Laws**

**SS.CV.8.9-12:** Analyze how individuals use and challenge laws to address a variety of public issues.

**SS.CV.9.9-12:** Evaluate public policies in terms of intended and unintended outcomes and related consequences.

**SS.CV.10.9-12:** Explain the role of compromise and deliberation in the legislative process.

A full version of ILSBE Social Studies standards can be found at [http://www.isbe.state.il.us/ils/social_science/pdf/ss-stds-eff012716.pdf](http://www.isbe.state.il.us/ils/social_science/pdf/ss-stds-eff012716.pdf).
States and districts should enact policies that support teachers’ inclusion of civic discussions.

Teachers should have access to “standards, curricular materials, and professional development that ensure students discuss the root causes of social problems when they participate in service-learning and ensure that student groups address social issues.”

These recommendations are deeply rooted in the recognition that civic education, above all else, must focus on making sure that all students receive high-quality civic learning experience. If K-12 schools do not succeed in instilling a sense of civic responsibility and developing skills to carry out those civic responsibilities in all students, the foundation of our democracy will be at peril.

There have been innovative civic education policy reforms in states such as Florida and Illinois. Leaders in each state developed locally relevant strategies for strengthening and equalizing civic learning.

Florida’s K-12 Approach

Florida passed the most ambitious civic education law to date in 2010—with strong backing from Senator Bob Graham, Congressman Lou Frey, and Justice Sandra Day O’Connor—to integrate civic learning throughout students’ educational careers. It begins in elementary English and language arts classes, is anchored by a required middle school civics course that culminates in a high-stakes exam, and is capped by experiential civic learning during high school. The middle-school civics exam scores count for 30 percent of the course grade and affect teacher evaluation and the school’s performance rating. The course and the exam are tightly aligned, and teachers are instructed to follow a strict pacing guide so they can cover all required standards.

The Justice Sandra Day O’Connor Civics Education Act connects elementary, middle, and high school civic education to ensure that students get the building blocks of civic participation at appropriate grade levels. Most recently, the Lou Frey Institute at the University of Central Florida created the Partnership for Civic Learning, which regularly convenes district leaders, policymakers, state education agency officials, and researchers to develop strategies, evaluate ongoing progress based on data, and troubleshoot challenges. The feedback loop of data and strategic adjustment involves state-level policymakers, university researchers, curriculum developers, and all 67 of Florida’s county-level school districts, among others. This mechanism allows for improvements in professional development, classroom strategies, and ultimately, student performance.

Illinois Marries Standards and Outreach

Illinois passed an ambitious civic education law, HB 4025, which Governor Bruce Rauner signed in August 2015. It mandates that high school students take a stand-alone civics course that requires them to meet content standards while also developing advanced civic skills such as deliberation. In January 2016, the Illinois State Board of Education revised the ninth through twelfth grade learning standards significantly, in keeping with the law’s intent.

The newly revised Social Studies Framework is modeled after a framework published by National Council of Social Studies in 2013. The Illinois standards provide guidance on core strategies and goals that courses in social studies disciplines should accomplish (table 1), followed by discipline-specific content standards (table 2). As illustrated in table 1, students’ learning begins with forming inquiries, developing claims with supporting evidence, and using that developed knowledge for real-world problem solving.

In teacher training sessions in two rural Illinois regions, I observed that teaching civics this way represents a paradigm shift for many teachers. That is why in-person regional training, a network of mentors and trainers, and support from regional offices of education that provide continuing education credits are essential for successful implementation of Illinois’s law. Practices that have been in place for years in affluent suburbs and Chicago, a district that has invested in civic learning, need to be extended to remote, low-resource schools, and Illinois’s approach addresses this need. And from what I witnessed, teachers welcome these new strategies.

“Communicating conclusions and taking informed action” is the element that makes teachers new to the framework the most anxious.
anxious: They wonder what “action” means and whether they have to arrange dozens of community service sites. Training helps allay this fear, as teachers learn many ways to address this dimension of learning. For example, teachers in the Illinois sessions learned how to use the 2016 election to engage students in finding root causes for familiar problems, understanding how decisions are made, and identifying and acting on solutions. In trying out the exercises themselves, the teachers were animated and eager to exchange ideas.

Led by the McCormick Foundation’s Shawn Healy and Mary Ellen Daneels, a master social studies teacher at West Chicago Community High School, an implementation team trained teacher mentors in key pedagogical strategies in June, and the mentors are to train and support other teachers throughout the year, working closely with 10 regional partners (regional offices of education, colleges, and universities) that will host in-service training.

How could such an ambitious law pass—and, even more surprisingly, get implemented fully—in a state struggling through an unprecedented budget crisis? As with any strong policy, Illinois’s new law is a product of 10 years of relationship and community building that helped bill designers carefully consider how a proposed law could be implemented successfully in any part of the state.

The effort began with a convening in 2006 of 80 local and national groups organized by the Constitutional Rights Foundation Chicago, which in 2009 produced “Blueprint for Civic Learning in Illinois High Schools” to guide schools that were committed to civic learning. The Illinois Civic Mission Coalition, which spearheaded efforts to pass the 2015 law, had an earlier success when the Civic Education Advancement Act was passed in 2007. That act codified an initiative called Illinois Democracy Schools, in which schools could be certified as providing schoolwide civic learning.

The McCormick Foundation now leads this initiative, a vibrant community of 41 schools that have gone through a rigorous assessment process of identifying and improving practices that demonstrate building-wide commitment to civic learning, not just in social studies class. Within each building, the Democracy School certification requires administrators’ strong support and commitment, as well as student and teacher collaboration. Once a school decides to seek Democracy School recognition, the full network of schools offers concrete advice and shares resources. In the most recent annual gathering of Illinois Democracy Schools, I witnessed firsthand how schools from communities with varied economic, demographic, and political characteristics come together around a shared mission of educating Illinois students for democracy.

In 2009, the Illinois state board of education issued a resolution endorsing the Illinois Civic Blueprint, and the same year then Governor Quinn issued a letter recognizing Democracy Schools. In 2011, the Illinois State Senate recognized and commended the existing Democracy Schools and resolved that each school district’s school report card indicate its Democracy School status. The Illinois Report Card began recognizing Democracy School status in 2014, and the state board announced that the Illinois Civic Mission Coalition would create and coordinate a task force charged with revising state social studies standards.

Beyond the legislative work and policy development, this 10-year effort in Illinois involved convincing one skeptic at a time and getting buy-in from unexpected places, including both Chicago daily newspapers, neighborhood associations, corporations, philanthropy, and the Chicago Teachers Union.

There are two important ways in which the Illinois approach to civic education reform should represent the future of all schools: 1) it frontloads equity, by ensuring that students in every corner of the state can get high-quality civic learning by training the trainers and creating regional hubs for support, and 2) through the required civics course and the Democracy Schools initiative, all Illinois students will be able to learn to participate and take informed action in everyday life.

Advancing Civic Education in Your State

Many of the changes in Illinois’s approach to civic learning would not have been possible without the close partnership of the coalition of citizen groups and the Illinois state board of education from the very early stages of this effort. Collaboration will be important for all
states in advancing education reform in this and every area. But the Illinois case, the Florida case, and the report of the Commission for Youth Civic Knowledge and Voting inspire some additional recommendations for state policymakers:

- Standards have the power to set the tone. The Illinois state board endorsed an ambitious civic learning agenda early on and communicated its commitment to high-quality civic learning by revising learning standards.

- When standards allow flexibility in how schools can express the underlying principles, they can come up with culturally relevant ways to design their civic learning experiences, and in some cases, students can do so.

- Strategies to support implementation must address inequity head on, build grassroots infrastructure through initial investments, and recognize and reward excellence.

Civic education of American children and youth has always been essential, but the value of deeper civic education cannot be overemphasized in the current political climate. Strong civic education develops young people’s capacity to grapple with contentious, possibly divisive, issues such as immigration reform and gun regulations in an informed, rigorous, yet civil manner. Education reforms that support strong civic education, accompanied by thoughtful implementation plans such as the one in Illinois, help realize the ideal of equity in access to high-quality education. Equity in access to strong civic education, among all subjects, is imperative because doing so not only affects individual “success” as citizens but also our nation’s civic health collectively. The future of civic health, therefore, goes hand in hand with equity in civic education, and it requires laws and resources to support that ideal.

5These opportunities were defined as a combination of “learning about problems in society, learning about current events, studying issues about which one cares, experiencing an open climate for classroom discussions of social and political topics, hearing from civic role models, learning about ways to improve the community, and working on service learning projects” (Joseph E. Kahne and Susan E. Spote, “Developing Citizens: The Impact of Civic Learning Opportunities on Students’ Commitment to Civic Participation,” American Educational Research Journal 45, no. 3 (2008): 738–66.
8For example, see Diana E. Hess, Controversy in the Classroom: The Democratic Power of Discussion (New York: Routledge, 2009).
9Commission for Youth Civic Knowledge and Voting, All Together Now: Collaboration and Innovation for Youth Engagement (Medford, MA: Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, 2013).