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The State of Civic Education in Rhode Island

Report on the 2022 Rhode Island Survey on Civic Learning

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September 2022



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Introduction

Over the past few years, policymakers, educators, and other stakeholders in Rhode Island have sought to revitalize and reimagine what civic learning should look like in the state. First, in 2021, the state passed the Civic Literacy Act, which requires that all students achieve civics proficiency and engage in one student-led civics project before graduation.¹ Second, in partnership with the Rhode Island History and Social Studies Advisory Committee (RIHSSAC), the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) is currently undergoing a process to revise the History and Social Studies Standards and Framework.² Finally, as part of the resolution of the federal lawsuit *Cook v. McKee*, in which Rhode Island students sued the state for failing to provide them with an adequate civic education, RIDE announced the creation of a Civic Readiness Task Force, convening from September 2022 to March 2023, to advise the Commissioner.³

Within this context, the Rhode Island Civic Learning Coalition (RICLC) commissioned the 2022 Survey on Civic Learning in Rhode Island to better understand the current landscape of civic education in the state. The coalition is a multiracial, multiethnic, and multigenerational group committed to ensuring that all Rhode Islanders, including young people and those most marginalized from our democratic system, have equitable access to high-quality civic learning opportunities. The coalition worked with the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) at Tufts University's Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life as well as the national nonprofit Generation Citizen to produce this report.

Survey results show that students in Rhode Island face a number of challenges when it comes to civic education access that result in inequitable civic outcomes.

First, most students do not have access to direct instruction in civics, and instead learn about civics and government in a haphazard fashion when their teachers have the interest and are able to find the time to bring civic learning into their classrooms. This is due to a lack of resources, training, and support for civics at the district level. Administrators struggle to prioritize civics, and often misunderstand teachers' needs. Despite these challenges, teachers feel ready and able to teach civics content, and both teachers and students recognize the value of civic learning in schools.

This ad hoc approach results in significant inequities in the quality of civic education students have access to and in students' civic development outcomes. Less advantaged students are less likely to have access to regular discussion of current events and to safe and affirming classroom environments. As a result, these students are more likely to have lower levels of civic knowledge, less likely to be confident in their civic skills, and less likely to have the kinds of dispositions that lead to long-term civic engagement as adults. In short: these findings suggest that there are major inequities in both civic learning and engagement across the state.

¹ Governor's Office, State of Rhode Island, "Governor McKee Signs Legislation on Civics Education in Schools."

² Rhode Island Department of Education, "Content Standards."

³ Rhode Island Department of Education, "RIDE Calls for RI Civic Readiness Task Force Applications."

In line with these findings, this report makes the following recommendations:

- The state should ensure that districts make civic learning a priority.
- Teachers need quality training and resources to help students meet new requirements.
- Inequities in access to high-quality civic education must be addressed.
- Students deserve the opportunity to develop civic knowledge, skills, and character in safe and affirming environments.
- We must ensure young people are prepared to take their place as participants in American democracy.

Methods

Purpose

In the spring of 2022, CIRCLE and Generation Citizen fielded two surveys to better understand the state of civic education in Rhode Island.

The first online survey, taken by Rhode Island teachers and school administrators, was designed to measure:

1. Teachers' perceived readiness to teach civics in alignment with the new civics mandate and state standards
2. Their instructional practices and implementation of the new mandate, especially with regards to inquiry-based and project-based approaches
3. The support and professional development opportunities provided by their schools

The second online survey, for current Rhode Island public school students as well as recent attendees and graduates, answered the following research questions:

1. How do K-12 students experience civic learning and civic participation in Rhode Island?
2. What civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions do K-12 students in Rhode Island have?
3. Is there any systematic variation in civic learning, civic participation, and civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions based on student demographics or district context?

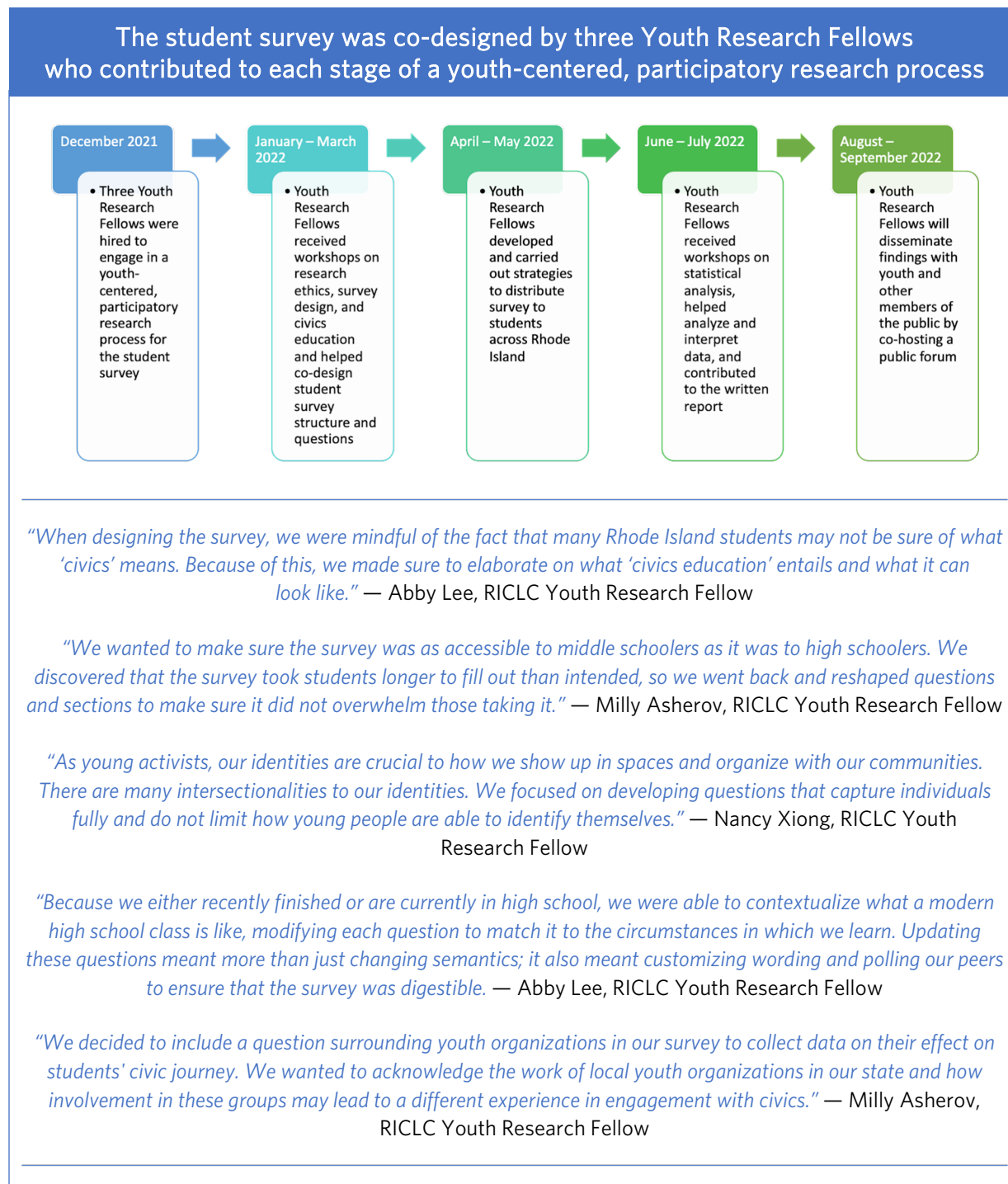
Respondents

More than 160 public school educators across Rhode Island responded to our teacher and administrator survey. This included 121 classroom teachers from 30 different districts, 77% of whom were social studies teachers and almost all of whom taught in secondary settings. We also heard from 42 administrators from 11 districts, 80% of whom worked in secondary settings. Thus, our sample represents those who are most directly involved in civics education in the state (secondary-level Social Studies teachers), while also capturing the opinions of their administrators and their peers who worked in elementary schools and other subject areas.

For the student survey, we sought a stratified sample of students from districts with low, medium, and high proportions of economically disadvantaged students, English learners, and student racial diversity. A total of 971 middle and high school students responded to the student survey: 93% were

currently attending middle or high school, and 7% had recently attended and/or graduated from high school. Of the students currently attending middle or high school, 45% were high school students and 55% were middle school students. The sample included students from 28 public school districts, 6 charter schools, and 3 state-operated schools.

Student Survey Design



Civic Learning in Rhode Island Schools

Access

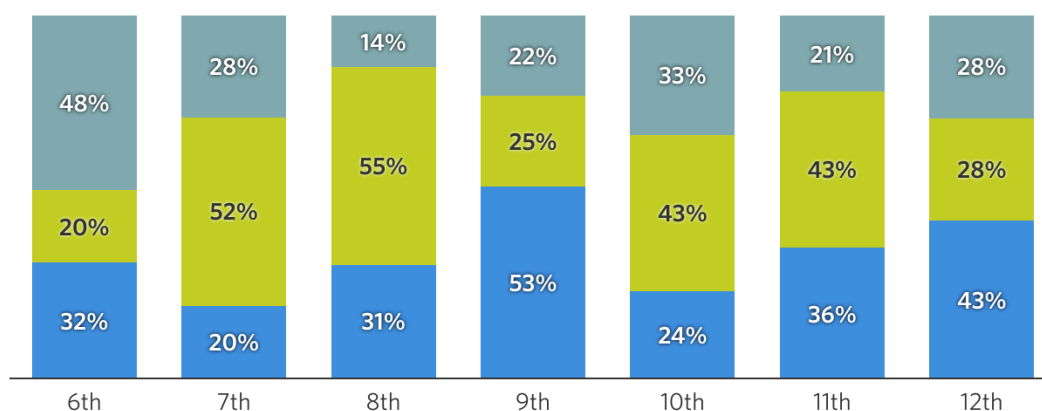
Access to high-quality civics education is an important prerequisite for civic learning and engagement among students. Across Rhode Island, district-level barriers restrict access to civic learning, while individual teachers work hard to overcome these obstacles within their classrooms.

Most students access civic education through their social studies classes because there is little investment in civics outside of social studies. Even these experiences are often indirect. Fewer than half (46%) of teachers and only 21% of administrators said their district has standalone civics courses, and only 12% of teachers and 10% of administrators said there is an attempt in their school or district to integrate civic learning across multiple disciplines.

These findings are reflected in the student survey. Students reported learning about civics and/or United States government topics through numerous courses, including Civics, United States History, Government, Social Studies, or Humanities; and electives such as Law and Society, Social Justice, Social Issues, and Criminal Justice. At most grade levels, fewer than half of student respondents indicated that they took a class mainly focused on civics and/or United States government (except in 9th grade). Nevertheless, most students at each grade level took either a class mainly focused on civics and/or United States government or a class that included some civics and/or United States government topics.

Whether students took a civics-related course by grade level

- Yes, I took a class mainly focused on civics and/or United States government.
- Yes, I took a class that included some civics and/or United States government topics.
- No, I did not take a class that taught civics and/or United States government topics.



Note: Graph only includes data from students who 1) are currently in or already completed each grade level and 2) remember whether or not they took a civics-related class.

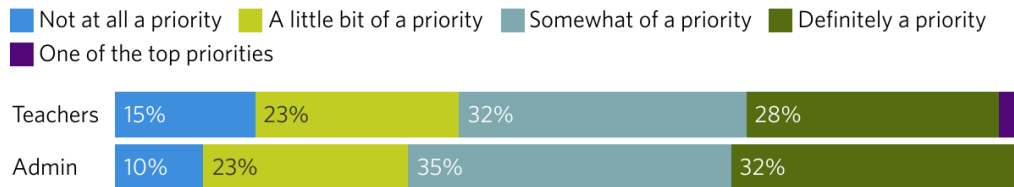
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Source: 2022 RICLC Rhode Island Survey on Civic Learning

District Level Support & Training

At the school and district levels, teachers report a lack of support and other structural barriers to implementing high-quality civics education. Administrators echo these concerns. More than a third of respondents do not feel the overall culture of their school or district supports high-quality civics education: 15% teachers and 10% administrators say civics is not a priority for their district/school, and 23% of both teachers and administrators say it is only a little bit of a priority. Notably, administrators perceive that civics is more of a priority than teachers do, which suggests a mismatch in communicating and understanding the district's priorities and may be the result of teachers feeling unsupported by administrators when it comes to civics.

How much of a priority is civic learning and development for your school or district?



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Source: 2022 RICLC Rhode Island Survey on Civic Learning

When administrators were asked how much time and energy they expected to be able to put into supporting teachers to implement the new civics projects and effective instruction in civics, more than half indicated that civics was not among their priorities: 29% said none at all, and 23% said just a little, or less than other subject areas.

When it came to specific support that districts may or may not be providing, teachers reported a lack of time, training, and resources for teaching civics. More than half (55%) of teachers said they don't have access to civics-related professional development opportunities, and 36% of administrators also said there was not access to civics professional development in their district. More than a third (36%) of teachers said they don't have access to curricular materials for teaching civics, and among those who do, more than a fifth (23%) said they were difficult to locate, access, and/or use. Administrators also cited a lack of availability of curricular materials (33% said not available), but very few (10%) thought that the curricular materials that did exist were difficult to access or use.

"My civics textbook is from 2007. My entire 'curriculum' consists of selected chapters from the textbook."

This mismatch suggests that administrators might have information about materials that is not being communicated to teachers, or that they have a misunderstanding of the challenges teachers face. That points to a need for better communication and information sharing in regard to available resources and

materials. In addition to not having readily available teaching materials, 50% of teachers and 44% of administrators said they do not have adequate opportunities to develop civics lessons.

Additionally, districts seem to be struggling to integrate the state standards and the new civics projects into their work in a number of ways. First, there is relatively little communication about the importance and intentions of the standards. Among administrators, 38% had not discussed the Grade Span Expectations (GSEs) for Social Studies with teachers at all, and 68% had not discussed the student-led civics project with their teachers (and most of those who had did so only briefly). More than half (51%) of administrators said they have not started planning to implement the projects, and most (71%) still don't know who will be responsible for the implementation.

"I nor anyone in the history department at my school have had any discussion about implementing civics into our classes with anyone outside our department/school, we have one civics class with no resources and no curriculum, we have not seen the civics standards or any curriculum or any resources."

There is also not a lot of anticipated progress on these topics. When asked whether their school or district had provided teachers with concrete support and encouragement to teach civics in a way that aligns with the Rhode Island GSEs for Social Studies, 33% of administrators said "no" and did not think that their school/district would have the time or resources to do so during the next academic year. An additional 42% said "no," but added that they have some intention to provide support in the upcoming school year.

Teacher Input: What additional resources and supports related to civics teaching and learning would be helpful at this time?

- A detailed guideline related to civic conversations.
- Commitment from the district to teach this topic at the Middle School level.
- Access to an approved curriculum with evidence-based approaches to instruction (especially for special education students and multi-lingual learners).
- Professional development and ready-made lesson plans.
- Having a full year to teach civics instead of history.
- Training, resources, and class time.
- Grade-level scope and sequence with timed lessons; project-based learning opportunities and ideas.

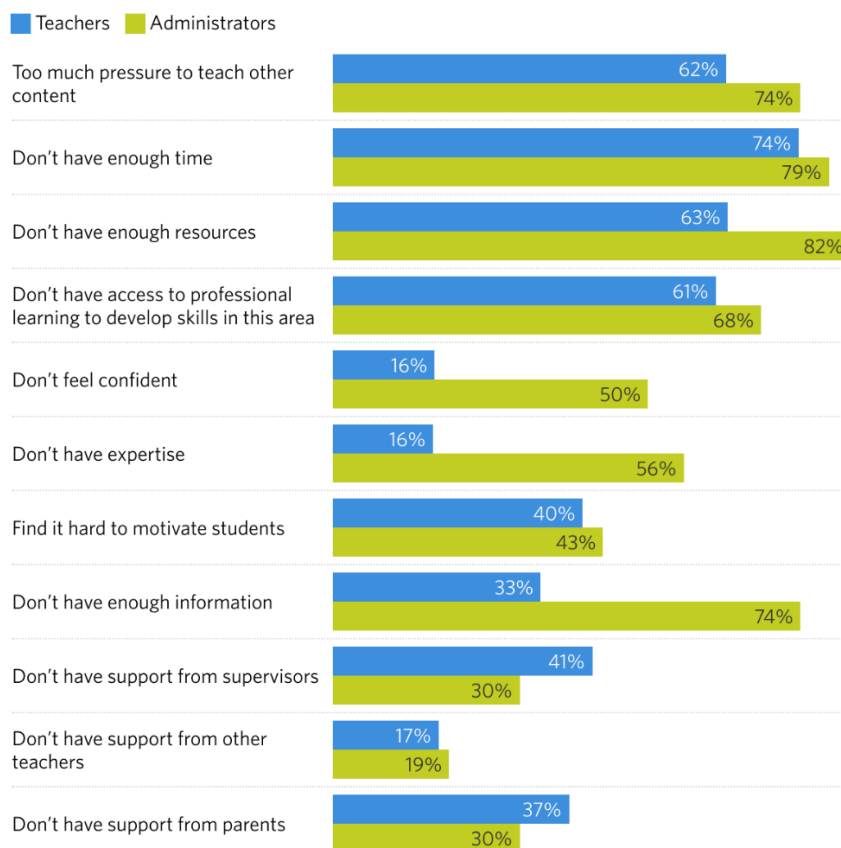
Overcoming Barriers at the Classroom Level

Despite these significant challenges, teachers report high levels of efficacy and readiness for implementing high-quality civics education, and they believe it is an important part of a well-rounded social studies framework. Almost all (95%) of the responding teachers believed they can teach civics content effectively, and 87% said they have a sufficient knowledge base to provide direct civics

instruction in line with state standards. Administrators perceive lacking necessary background knowledge and skills as a larger barrier to implementing high-quality civics education than teachers do, but both groups recognize that competition for time and resources with other subjects is a major barrier that needs to be overcome.

Notably, administrators perceive the barriers to teaching civics in a way aligned with the standards and framework to be much higher than teachers overall. This could be a function of administrators being exposed to more information about their districts, budgets, and policy environments that lead them to perceive barriers as more significant. It could also be a misunderstanding of teachers' willingness and capacity for teaching civics. Administrators also perceive higher levels of support from supervisors and parents than teachers do, which again suggests a lack of clear communication and understanding across the groups. This lack of alignment between teachers and administrators can make it especially difficult to shift practice around civics instruction, because administrators do not have a clear understanding of teachers' needs and challenges, and teachers may feel unheard or perceive that their supervisors do not care or do not trust their abilities or assessments of their classrooms.

Percent of teachers & administrators who agree that the following barriers significantly interfere with teachers' ability to teach civics in a way that is aligned with the GSEs for Social Studies



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 Source: 2022 RICLC Rhode Island Survey on Civic Learning

Teachers also believe strongly in the value and importance of civics for their students. Although they face significant barriers, teachers expressed a strong desire for more support, resources, time and investment from their districts and from the state to prioritize civic education. A selection of teacher statements about the importance of making room for civics in the curriculum are included below:

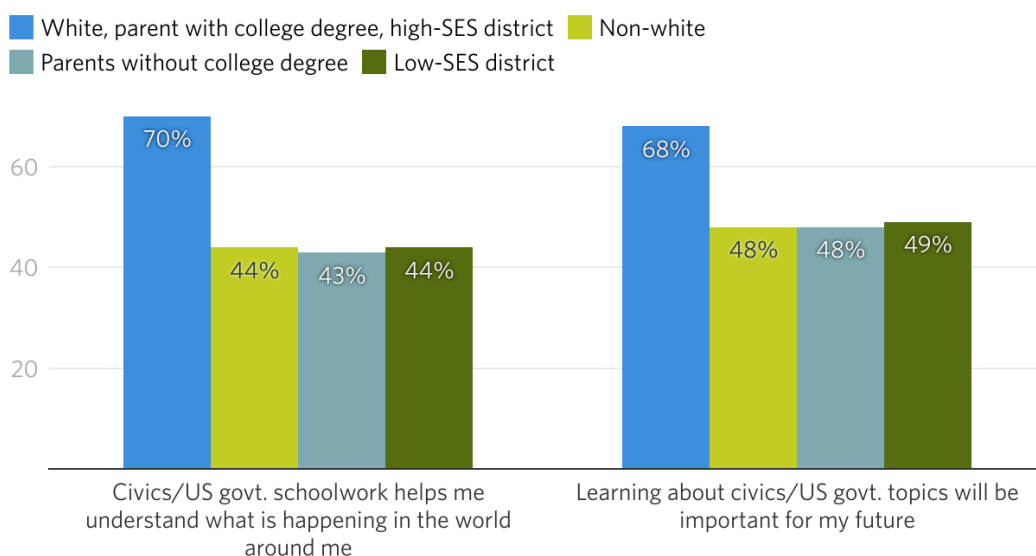
“Civics education needs to be implemented at ALL levels of education, not just high school.”

“Teaching civics is so vital, and time needs to be put aside for quality civic instruction.”

“Civics should be the base of social studies teaching. I believe it needs to be reinforced in each grade level.”

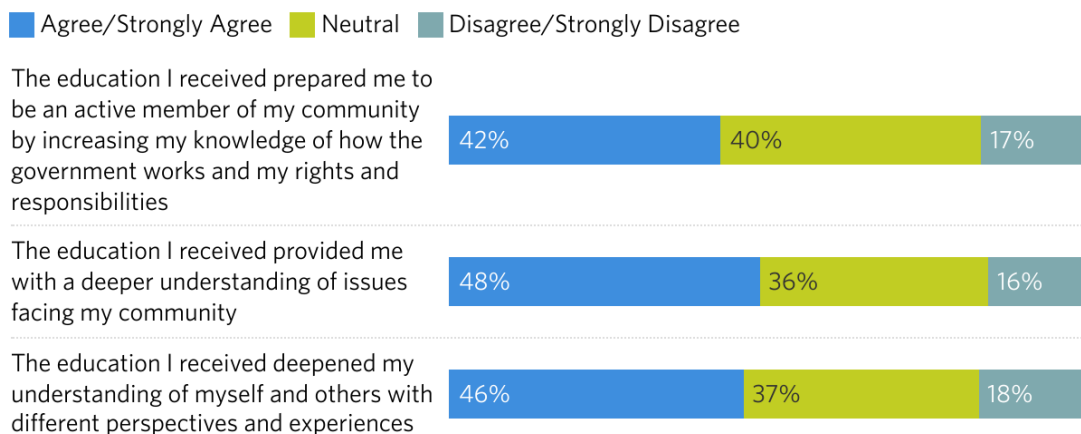
Many students also felt strongly about the importance of civic education; 54% of students “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that learning about civics and/or United States government topics will be important for their future, and 53% “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that civics and/or United States government schoolwork helps them understand what is happening in the world around them. Responses to these statements differed significantly, however, by students’ race/ethnicity, parent education level, and district socioeconomic status. Students from more advantaged backgrounds were much more likely to see the value of civic education compared to their peers who were non-white, whose parents or caregivers did not have a college degree, or who attended a less economically resourced district.

Percent of students who selected “strongly agree” or “agree” to prompts about the value of civics coursework



Although many students responded that they felt learning about civics was valuable, fewer indicated that the education they have received thus far has provided them with useful civic knowledge. For example, only 42% of students “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that their education has prepared them to be an active member of their community by increasing their knowledge about government and their rights and responsibilities. These results also diverged across students from different backgrounds. While 55% of white students who have a parent with a college degree and live in a highly economically resourced district (where less than 13% of students receive free or reduced lunch) “agreed” or “strongly agreed” with that statement, only 34% of non-white students and 32% of students living in a less economically resourced district (where more than 65% of students receive free or reduced lunch) said the same. This suggests that the quality of the civics education students receive may influence the extent to which they see civics education as valuable.

Student responses to statements about the quality of the civic education they receive



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Source: 2022 RICLC Rhode Island Survey on Civic Learning

Instructional Approaches

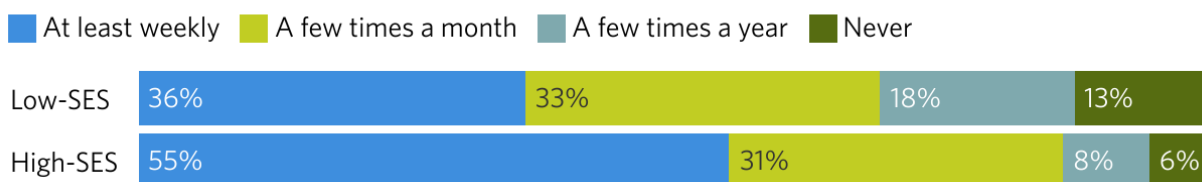
As suggested by the data above, one consequence of leaving decisions about civic learning up to teachers and individual districts may be that students in more highly resourced schools and classrooms — where teachers have the time, capacity, and resources to develop lessons and explore ideas with more depth — have better civic education experiences. This is supported by survey results which find that students from more advantaged backgrounds have more frequent and robust classroom discussions, and better overall classroom environments.

Current Events Discussion

One key indicator of high-quality civic education is regular discussion of current and controversial issues, especially discussions in which students can explore multiple points of view and where they

feel comfortable disagreeing with one another.⁴ Our survey found that nearly a quarter of students (22%) discussed current events or the news just a few times a year or less. As with other findings, students in less economically resourced (“low-SES”) districts were more likely to say that they enjoyed these opportunities than those in highly economically resourced (“high-SES”) districts. Conversely, while 86% of students in high-SES districts discussed current events or the news at least once or twice a month, 69% of students in low-SES districts said the same.

How often students “discuss current events or news” in class, by district socioeconomic status



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Source: 2022 RICLC Rhode Island Survey on Civic Learning

These same inequities persist when it comes to the inclusion of multiple perspectives. A quarter of all students (25%), including 27% of students in low-SES districts and 19% of students in high-SES districts, reported that they have discussions around current events which incorporate different points of view a few times a year or less. While 76% of students in high-SES districts responded that they have discussions around current events which incorporate different points of view at least a few times a month, only 57% of students in low-SES districts said the same. These findings indicate persistent inequities not only in access to current and controversial issues discussions, but also in the quality of those discussions. Because opportunities for discussion are a strong indicator of civic outcomes both in youth and among adults, this may lead to long-term gaps in civic participation among Rhode Island residents.⁵

Classroom Climate & Student Belonging

Another key part of a high-quality civics education in schools is school and classroom climate.⁶ While teachers generally felt that their classrooms were welcoming and affirming for students, student survey responses on questions about classroom climate and student belonging did not align with teacher perceptions. For example, 99% of teachers stated that they always, often, or sometimes “encourage students to discuss political or social issues about which people have different opinions,” but 28% of students “disagreed” or “strongly disagreed” with the statement “I am encouraged to discuss political or social issues about which people have different opinions.” Similarly, while 100% of teachers stated they always, often, or sometimes “encourage students to express opinions in class while respecting others,” 19% of students disagreed. And while 97% of teachers stated that they

⁴ Educating for American Democracy, “Educating for American Democracy: Excellence in History and Civics for All Learners”; Carnegie Corporation of New York and CIRCLE: The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, “The Civic Mission of Schools.”

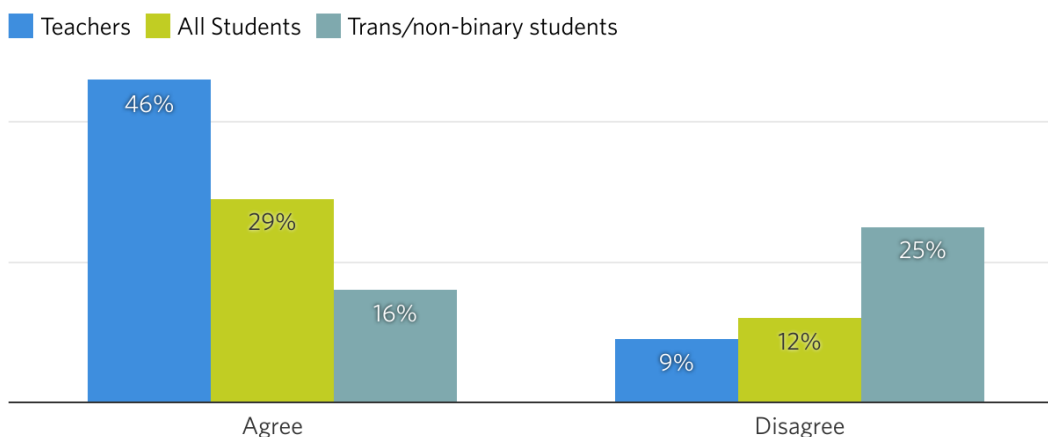
⁵ Campbell, “Voice in the Classroom.”

⁶ Educating for American Democracy, “Educating for American Democracy: Excellence in History and Civics for All Learners.”

always, often, or sometimes “give students frequent opportunities to connect their classroom work to their personal experiences, identities, and communities,” 32% of students did not feel that they had those kinds of opportunities.

These differences also extended to students’ sense of belonging at school and in their social studies classrooms. Compared to how students themselves said they felt, teachers were more likely to believe that students felt like they were a part of a community where people care about each other. While these numbers were slightly lower for non-white students and students in low-SES districts, trans and non-binary students were significantly less likely than their peers to respond that they felt like a part of a community where people cared about each other. This is especially concerning, as it suggests that schools and teachers may not be creating spaces that are welcoming and affirming for gender-minority and gender non-conforming youth.

Teachers' and students' perceptions of belonging in the classroom



Note: Teachers responded to the statement: “Students feel like they are part of a community where people care about each other,” and students responded to the statement: “In my social studies class and school, I feel like I am part of a community where people care about each other.”

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Source: 2022 RICLC Rhode Island Survey on Civic Learning

Elementary School Teachers

We heard from only a small number of teachers who are specifically elementary, K-8, or K-12 teachers. However, even among this small set of respondents, there were some noticeable differences when compared to secondary teachers. First, elementary teachers report slightly lower levels of confidence and preparedness to teach civics, especially when it comes to media literacy. They also reported using pedagogies focused on media literacy, such as drawing on knowledge from multiple sources, less often than secondary teachers. They are less likely to incorporate current events discussion or exploration of community issues, and less likely to try to use inquiry-based lessons. However, they generally report the same barriers to implementing high-quality civics education as other teachers, especially a lack of resources or access to professional development.

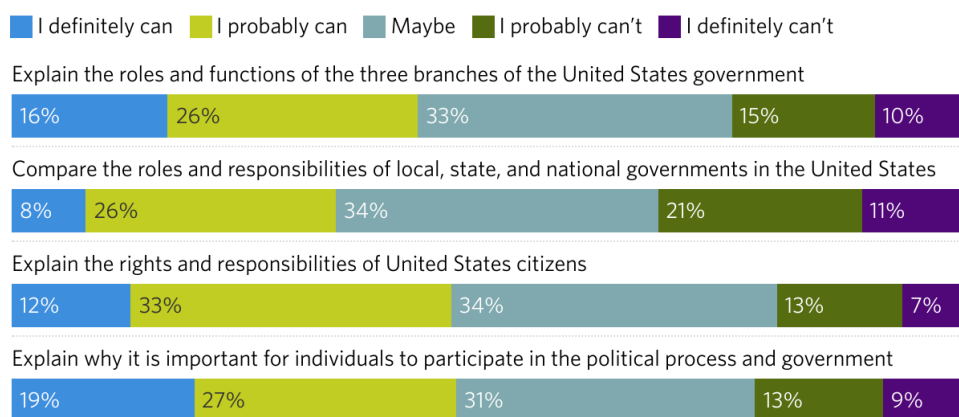
Civic Outcomes for Rhode Island Youth

The previous section discussed the current state of civic learning in schools across Rhode Island. The next section considers the implications of civic learning for young people’s civic development and civic preparation. Civic learning influences students’ civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions as well as how they choose to civically engage in their communities. Given the current state of civic education, how are young people doing in terms of their civic development, and are they gaining the skills, knowledge, and experiences they need to be engaged and effective members of their communities? The answers vary significantly based on student background and access to opportunity. The survey findings in this section reveal that there are significant inequities between different student groups (including race/ethnicity, parent education level, language spoken at home, and district socioeconomic status) in civic knowledge, skills, dispositions, and participation, which have implications for the state’s approach to civic education policies and support moving forward.

Civic Knowledge

While we did not explicitly test students on their civic knowledge, the survey used four items adapted from the 2018 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Civics Survey Questionnaire to try to capture their confidence in major areas of civic knowledge, including U.S. government structure and function, and the roles and responsibilities of citizenship.⁷ Less than 50% of surveyed students responded that they “definitely can” or “probably can” explain the roles and functions of the three branches of the United States government; compare the roles and responsibilities of local, state, and national governments in the United States; explain the rights and responsibilities of United States citizens; and explain why it is important for individuals to participate in the political process and government.

Civic knowledge of middle and high school students in Rhode Island



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 Source: 2022 RICLC Rhode Island Survey on Civic Learning

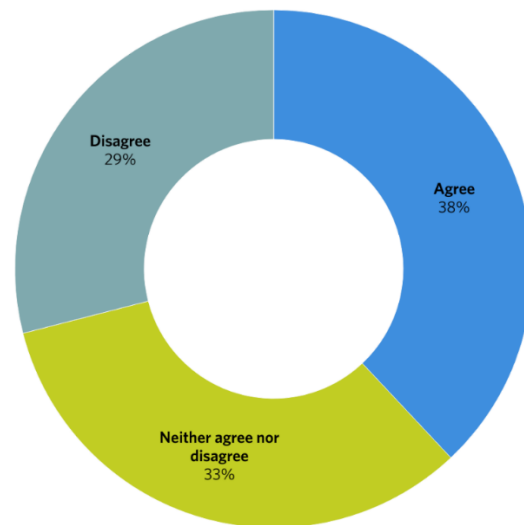
⁷ National Assessment of Educational Progress, “The Nation’s Report Card: 2018 Sample Questions for Grade 8 Civics, Geography, and U.S. History.”

Local Knowledge

These trends in national-level civic knowledge are also reflected in recent surveys on local, state-specific civic knowledge. Data collected by the Rhode Island Center for Humanities in their 2022 Civic Health Index Survey (authored by the Rhode Island Council for the Humanities in partnership with the National Conference on Citizenship and the Rhode Island Department of State) shows that only a minority of Rhode Islanders have a strong understanding of Rhode Island history.

"I have a strong understanding of Rhode Island history"

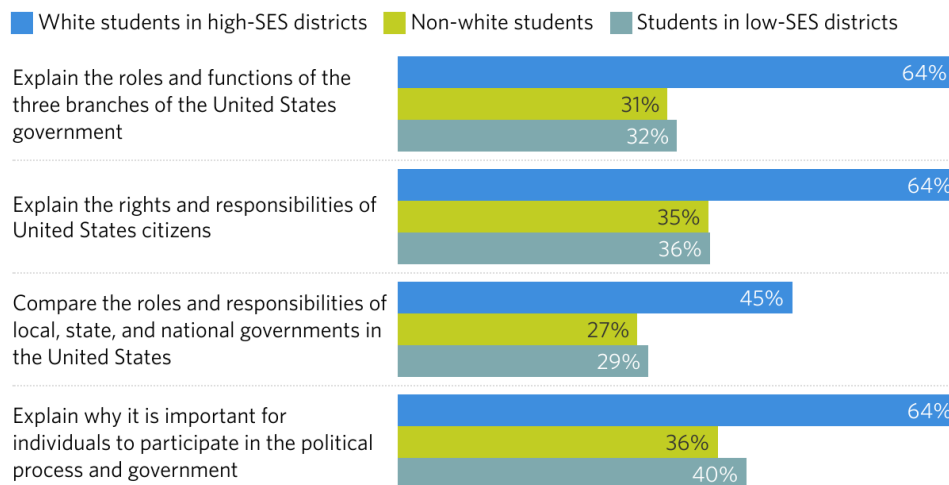
(from prior to contact between Indigenous and European people to the present day)



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 Source: Rhode Island Center for Humanities 2022 Civic Health Index Survey

There were also significant differences in responses to knowledge items across demographic groups. White students, students who have a caregiver with a college degree, and students from high-SES school districts were more likely to respond that they felt confident they could explain various basic civics concepts compared to non-white students, students whose first language at home is not English, students who do not have a caregiver with a college degree, and students from low-SES districts.

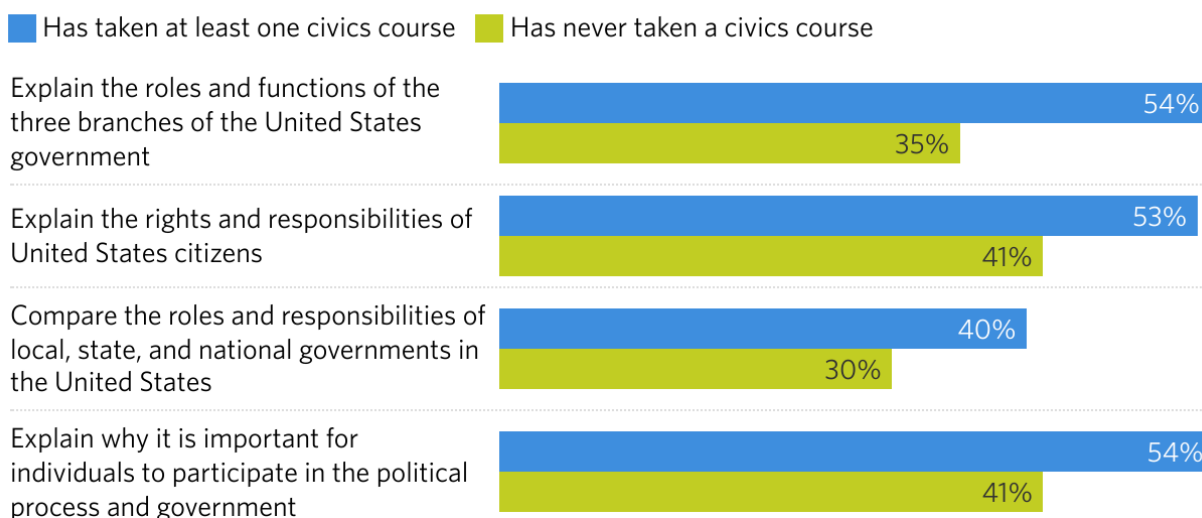
Percent of students who responded "I definitely can" or "I probably can" to statements about civic knowledge



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 Source: 2022 RICLC Rhode Island Survey on Civic Learning

Finally, students who indicated that they had taken a civics course in the past (38% of the students surveyed) were more likely to respond that they felt confident they could explain various basic civics concepts compared to students who indicated they had not taken a civics course before. This is important evidence in favor of the value and impact of civics for improving student outcomes and helping students to feel more knowledgeable and confident participating in civic life.

Percent of students who responded "I definitely can" or "I probably can" to statements about civic knowledge by civics coursetaking experience



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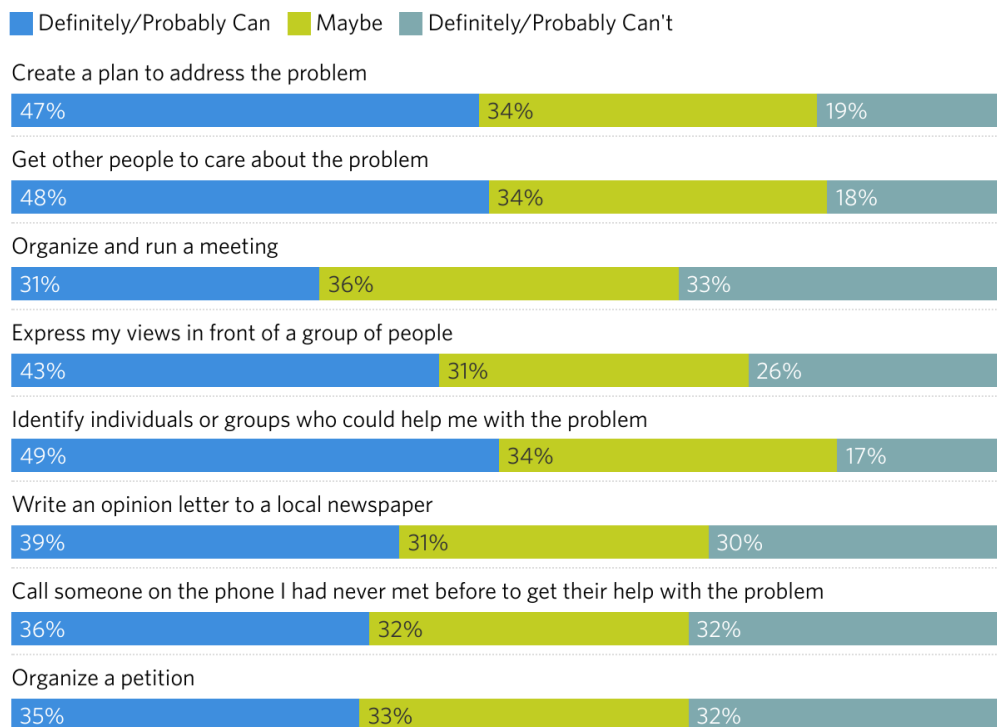
Source: 2022 RICLC Rhode Island Survey on Civic Learning

Civic Skills

To assess student civic skills, the survey asked students about their perceived competence taking civic actions.⁸ Overall, students did not feel especially confident about taking action to address issues that they cared about. Less than half of students responded that they “definitely can” or “probably can” engage in a series of relevant actions: create a plan to address a problem, get other people to care about a problem, express their views in front of a group of people, identify individuals or groups who could help them with the problem, write an opinion letter to a local newspaper, call someone on the phone they had never met before to get their help with the problem, or organize a petition. Notably, students were especially unsure about their ability to organize and run a meeting, a key skill relevant for both civic participation and for career readiness.

⁸ Flanagan, Syvertsen, and Stout, “Civic Measurement Models.”

Student confidence taking action to address issues they care about



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 Source: 2022 RICLC Rhode Island Survey on Civic Learning

As with other key indicators, the percent of students who were confident they could execute these civic skills varied by race/ethnicity, parent education level, and the proportion of students in the district receiving free or reduced lunch. In addition, it is notable that there was no significant difference in civic skills between students who have taken civics and those who have not. This suggests that the civics courses students have taken in the past may have emphasized rote memorization of civic knowledge without including skill-based civic learning through hands-on, real-world experiences.

Civic Dispositions

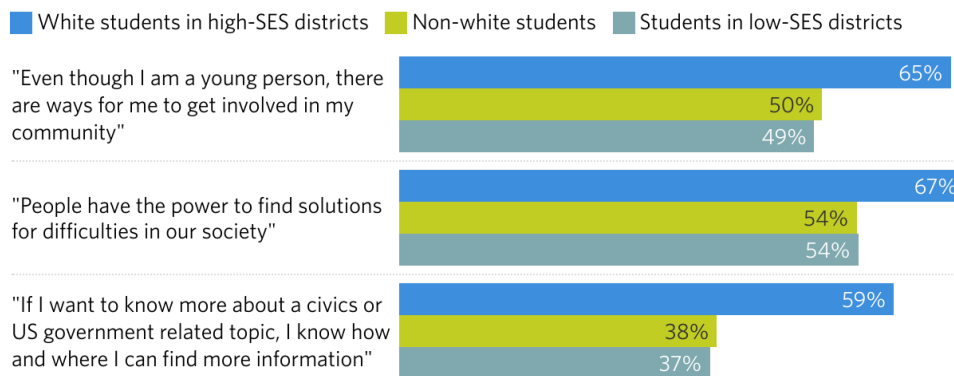
Survey questions assessed civic dispositions including civic efficacy,⁹ societal hope,¹⁰ and self-advocacy. The following chart displays the percent of students who responded they “agree” or “strongly agree” to several of these statements, disaggregated by student race/ethnicity, parent education level, and district SES. In general, more than half of students agreed or strongly agreed that there are ways for young people to get involved in their community, that people have the power to find solutions for difficulties in society, and how and where to find more information about a civics or U.S. government related topic. However, the results varied depending on several factors. White students,

⁹ Amy Syvertsen, Laura Wray-Lake, and Aaron Metzger, “Youth Civic and Character Measures Toolkit.”

¹⁰ Jin and Kim, “Rainbows in the Society.”

students who have a caregiver with a college degree, and students from high-SES school districts were more likely to respond with “strongly agree” and “agree” to these statements on civic dispositions compared to nonwhite students, those who do not have a caregiver with a college degree, and students from low-SES school districts.

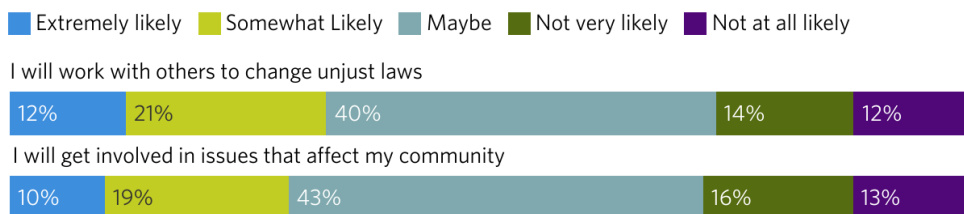
Percent of students who responded "strongly agree" or "agree" to statements related to civic dispositions



CIRCLE Tufts University Tisch College · CIRCLE
 Source: 2022 RICLC Rhode Island Survey on Civic Learning

These dispositions have important implications for future engagement, and prior research has shown that they are closely tied to important civic behaviors including voting, volunteering, and different forms of political speech.¹¹ Below, we present student responses to items about justice-oriented and participatory citizenship, two important approaches to involvement in civic life.¹² Just 33% of students responded that they were “extremely likely” or “somewhat likely” to work with others to change unjust laws, and 29% of students responded that they were “extremely likely” or “somewhat likely” to get involved in issues that affect their community. While responses to the first statement varied by race/ethnicity, parent education level, and district SES, there were no significant differences along these lines in response to the second statement.

Future civic/political involvement of students



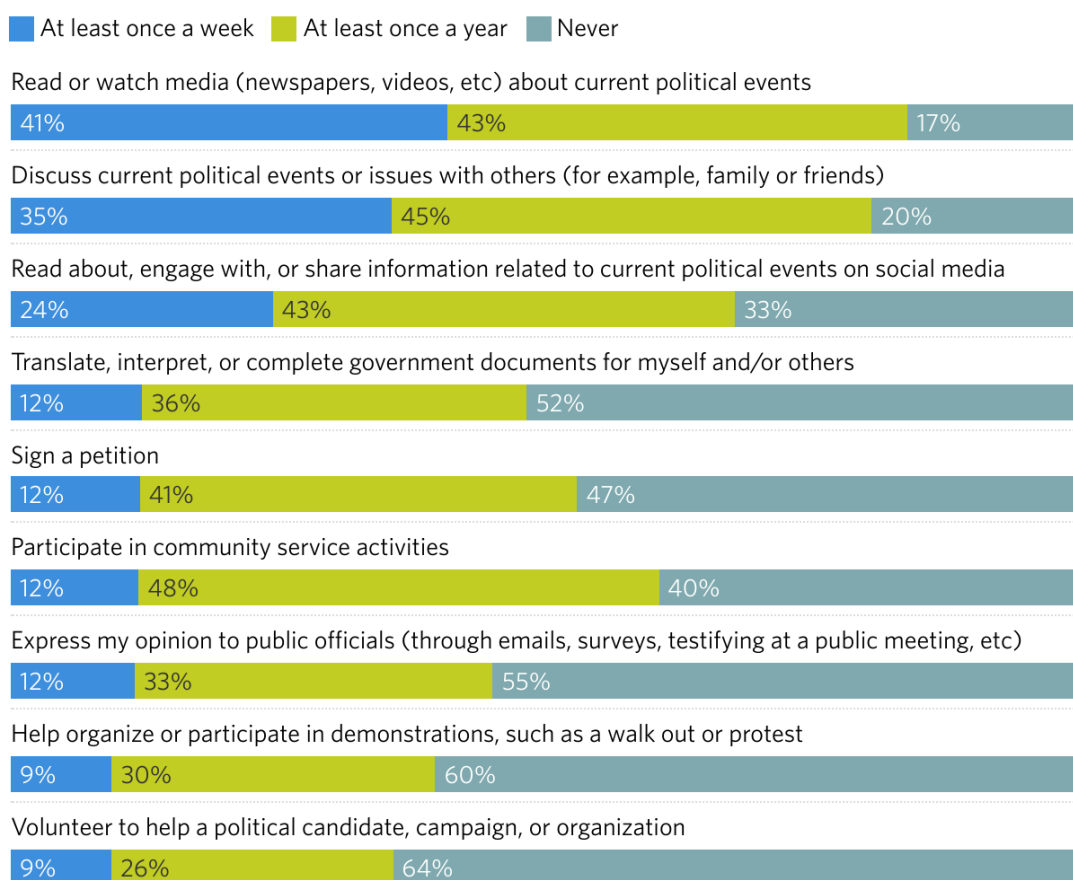
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 Source: 2022 RICLC Rhode Island Survey on Civic Learning

¹¹ Schulz, *Becoming Citizens in a Changing World*.
¹² Westheimer and Kahne, “What Kind of Citizen?”

Civic Participation

We asked students about a variety of different ways they might be civically engaged or involved in their local communities. The majority of respondents indicated that they read, shared, or talked about current events at least once or twice a year, and 41% indicated that they read or watched news media related to current political events at least once or twice a week. When it came to taking action beyond being informed and engaging with information, however, respondents were much less likely to say they've engaged in civic action. Only 12% of respondents reported that they volunteered regularly in their communities, and 40% of students had never participated in community service.

Frequency of student civic participation



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 Source: 2022 RICLC Rhode Island Survey on Civic Learning

Civic participation was also not uniform across different demographic groups. For example, 41% of students responded they read or watch media about current political events at least once or twice a week. However, while 50% of white students said so, only 33% of non-white students did. Similarly, 46% of students who have a parent with a college degree read or watch political media at least once or twice a week, compared to 36% of students who do not have a parent with a college degree; 46% of

students who mainly speak English at home do so at least once or twice a week, compared to 33% of students whose first language is not English; and 52% of students living in high-SES districts do so at least once or twice a week, compared to 38% of students living in low-SES districts. There were similar disparities along lines of race/ethnicity, parent education level, language spoken at home, and district SES for discussing current political events or issues with others.

However, students of color were more likely to participate in certain forms of political participation compared to white students. For example, 45% of non-white students responded that they participate in a demonstration at least once or twice a year, compared to only 33% of white students. Similarly, 40% of non-white students answered that they volunteer to support a political candidate, campaign, or organization at least once or twice a year compared to 30% of white students. Half (50%) of non-white students expressed their opinion to an elected official at least once or twice a year compared to 39% of white students; and 39% of non-white students translate, interpret, or complete government documents for themselves or others at least once or twice a month, compared to 22% of white students. There were no significant differences in across groups when it comes to participating in community service activities, which is one area where schools often play a role in encouraging civic engagement.

Implications & Recommendations

Students in Rhode Island face layers of challenges in accessing high-quality civic education and achieving the positive civic development necessary to become active and engaged participants in American democracy.

First, most students do not have access to direct instruction in civics, and instead learn about civics and government in a haphazard fashion when their teachers have the interest and are able to find the time to bring civic learning into their classrooms.

One major factor contributing to this situation is the lack of resources, training, and support for civics at the district level. Administrators struggle to prioritize civics, and often misunderstand what teachers need in order to align instruction to the new civics law as well as the existing GSEs for Social Studies. Despite these barriers, teachers feel ready and able to teach civics content, and both teachers and students recognize the value of civic learning in schools.

Unfortunately, this ad hoc approach means that there are major gaps and inequities in the kind of civic education students have access to and in students' civic development outcomes. More advantaged students are more likely to have access to civics classes, regular discussion of current events, and safe and affirming classroom environments. As a result, they have higher levels of civic knowledge, are more confident in their civic skills, and have the kinds of dispositions that lead to long-term civic engagement as adults. Students from less economically resourced districts, who come from immigrant or racially minoritized backgrounds report less-positive responses across measures of civic knowledge, skills, dispositions, and behaviors, suggesting major inequities in civic learning and engagement across the state.

Nevertheless, students continue to recognize the value of civic learning and have clear ideas about how their social studies classes might support their learning and development. In the survey, students were asked the optional, open-ended question: “If it were up to you, what topics related to civics and/or United States government would you like to learn about in school?” The 505 responses revealed the wide range of topics that students would like to study.

Students' Vision for Civics

Student Input: If it were up to you, what topics related to civics and/or United States government would you like to learn about in school?

- The many ways the people protested for rights
- What lawmakers do to impact their communities
- The in-depth successes and failures of parts of the government
- The effect that government decisions have on different minority groups (of race, religion, sexuality, etc.)
- The problems in the world today and how we are going about to fix them
- How I can make a change by protesting unjust court rulings and laws
- The issues we face with the environment
- The views of the two most influential political parties in the US and how the parties would deal with certain situations
- How to advocate for yourself. I would also like a more hands-on experience-based approach to civics education

Recommendations

The state should ensure that districts make civic learning a priority.

The recently enacted Rhode Island Civic Literacy Act tasks teachers with ensuring all students demonstrate proficiency in civics and have the opportunity to engage in a student-led civics project prior to graduation. However, the data suggests that teachers and administrators struggle to find time and energy to devote to civics amidst competing priorities. Without explicit guidance and a clear mandate on how civics can and should fit into a well-rounded K-12 education, civics will continue to be pushed aside. The state should provide funding, support, and clear guidance to districts to ensure that all students in Rhode Island have equitable access to a high-quality civics education that provides them with the tools necessary for participating in democratic life.

Teachers need quality training and resources to help students meet new requirements.

Teachers need curricular resources and professional development to ensure that all students gain the knowledge, skills, and dispositions they need to be active civic participants in society. At the district level, this means concrete supports (including funding for curricular resources and professional development), clear direction on how to implement student-led civics projects (including a definition on what a student-led civics project should look like), and guidelines on best practices for high-quality civics education (including how to deliberate current and controversial issues). There also needs to be a better understanding of teachers' needs and concerns, as well as improved communication about the resources, materials, and professional development opportunities available to teachers.

Inequities in access to high-quality civic education must be addressed.

Students of color and low-income students are the least likely to have access to civic learning experiences and to report that the civic education they receive is valuable in supporting their civic development. They also report lower quality civic education, such as less access to current events discussion and other “best practices” for civics instruction. These inequities are reflected in their civic outcomes. Students from low-income districts and students of color report lower levels of civic knowledge, and they are less likely to hold the kinds of civic dispositions that are associated with long-term civic engagement and efficacy. By leaving opportunities for high-quality civics up to individual teachers and districts, only the most advantaged students — those in districts where teachers have the time, capacity, and desire to teach civics amongst competing priorities — will be able to access the kinds of civic learning experiences they need to take on a meaningful role in their communities and in our democracy. By making civics a priority for all students in all districts, Rhode Island can help address these equity gaps and ensure more equitable experiences and outcomes for youth.

Students deserve the opportunity to develop civic knowledge, skills, and character in safe and affirming environments.

In order for civic education to be most effective, students need space to explore their own ideas and opinions and those of their peers, to form their own opinions, and to feel that their identities are affirmed and validated during that process. Unfortunately, our findings suggest that for many students in Rhode Island, this is not currently the case. Students from low-SES districts and students of color report fewer opportunities to discuss current and controversial issues when multiple perspectives are present. Inequities in civic education extend to LGBTQ+ students, students whose parents do not have a college degree, and students who speak a language other than English at home. And while these groups are also less likely than their white and high-SES district peers to say they feel like they are part of a caring classroom community where they belong, the situation is especially dire for trans, non-binary, and gender non-conforming youth, 25% of whom explicitly do not feel that they belong in their classroom communities.

We must ensure young people are prepared to take their place as participants in American democracy.

In the 2018 midterm election, less than 20% of Rhode Island 18- to 24-year-olds cast a ballot, compared to 65% of Baby Boomers and 48% of members of Generation X.¹³ In this survey, we also find that young people are not as well prepared as they could be for civic participation. Fewer than half of respondents felt they had the skills they needed to take action on issues they cared about, or the kind of foundational civic knowledge that is crucial to understanding American democracy. Making civics a priority in K-12 education in Rhode Island will help address this disparity in civic participation by ensuring that the next generation is able to gain the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary in order to be active civic participants in Rhode Island.

¹³ Rhode Island Dept. of State, “Elections Data, Voter Turnout.”

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CIRCLE (The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement) is a nonpartisan, independent, academic research center that studies young people in politics and presents detailed data on young voters in all 50 states. CIRCLE is part of the Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life at Tufts University.

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