

Chapter 15

Is Civics Education a Viable Path for Promoting the Social Justice Aims of K–12 Education?

Current Policies and Practices in U.S. Civics Education

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ABSTRACT

Many suggest that the declining national confidence in its governmental institutions and the political divisiveness in the USA is due to the lack of civic education most adults received in their K-12 schooling experience. Numerous calls for the revitalization of civic education have emerged and these take many forms. This chapter explores the current landscape of civic education in K-12 schooling and seeks to understand the potential influence of each in promoting social justice aims of civic education. The compelling question addressed is: Is civics education a viable path for promoting the social justice aims of K-12 education?

INTRODUCTION

A 2021 Gallop poll of American's confidence in U.S. institutions provides the landscape for understanding civics in the United States of America (USA). The overall trends from 1993-2021 suggest that overall confidence is decreasing (Brenan, 2021). "An average 33% of U.S. adults express 'a great deal' or 'quite a lot' of confidence in 14 institutions, marking a three-percentage-point decline since 2020" and a return to the level seven-plus percentage points below those observed before 2006 (Brenan, 2021, n.p.). These findings suggest confidence in the democratic institutions and media in general is waning. When comparing political party affiliation and poll results, partisan confidence diverged. Average confidence

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in government institutions lags behind confidence of previous generations. The pandemic has brought to light many of the inequities in U.S. institutions, and the discussion of these has been contentious. Many suggest that the declining national confidence in its governmental institutions is due to the lack of civic education most adults received in their K-12 schooling experience.

According to Supreme Court Justices Sotomayor and Gorsuch (Hurley, 2021), bipartisan support is needed to ensure children and youth have the opportunity to study of the American system of government, incorporate broad range of values relating to the rights and duties of citizenship, and the critical import of working from differing points of view toward the common good and the safeguarding of American democracy. Both Justices articulated concern about generational civic skill and knowledge losses over the last decades and the subsequent affects for our society. These were echoed by civic education organizations, such as iCivics and the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS). For example, in 2013, NCSS issued a position statement calling for the *Revitalization of Civic Learning in Our Schools*. The organization reasoned, “The narrowing of the curriculum that has occurred over the past several years combined with the scarce attention to civic learning in a number of state standards and assessment measures has had a devastating effect on schools’ ability to provide high quality civic education to all students. Further threatening the civic health of our nation is the civic opportunity gap that emerges when schools provide poor and nonwhite students fewer and less high-quality civic learning opportunities than they provide to middle class and wealthy white students....” (n.p.). Likewise, the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools issued a report claiming, “while there is no single solution that alone can revitalize our democracy, there is one common sense step our nation can take to strengthen it.... Investing in civic learning strengthens American democracy” (Gould, Jamieson, Levine, McConnell, & Smith, 2011, p. 6).

At best, calls for improved civic education from Supreme Court justices and non-profit organizations garnered polite interest, these calls for action were magnified when a mob stormed the U.S. Capitol vowing to hang the vice president (Bernstein, 2021). Many hoped that the Jan. 6 insurrection would prove to be the Sputnik Moment that finally drives the nation to take action to not only improve the state of civic education, but to also center its purpose in social justice. Yet, the political climate turned hostile toward democracy in part because many Americans do not understand that the nuances of the system are what keeps it afloat. With fears of more political violence akin to the Capitol insurrection, growing cynicism and lack of intuition confidence in the country and a general mistrust of government, the USA is very much in need of a new civics lesson and new ways to teach it. To begin to define this path, calls for a renewed commitment to civics have coalesced around existing efforts. The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the state of civics education in America and the initiatives which seek define its future.

BACKGROUND

What is Civics Education Worth?

What is civics education worth in the United States of America (USA)? According to the NCSS, the value of civic learning is the amplification effect it has on post-high school civic engagement. High school graduates with civic competencies learned through high quality civic education are “more likely to vote and discuss politics at home, to volunteer and work on community issues, and are more confident in their ability to speak publicly and communicate with their elected representatives” (NCSS, 2013, n.p.).

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