

Chapter 5


Social Studies and Civics: Engaging Students in Democracy and Community

Lesia C. Lennex

 <http://orcid.org/0009-0007-9447-5320>

Morehead State University, USA

Abbigaile C. Easter

 <http://orcid.org/0009-0002-1642-3713>

Morehead State University, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter presents information regarding social studies engagement in civics education activities. In what way(s) are teachers currently engaging with civics content? To answer that question, two projects were undertaken: The Voter Registration Project and a 2025 Survey of 5-12 teachers. The Voter Registration Project is all about empowering and educating our young voters, increasing voter registration and civic engagement, and actively participating in civic engagement. Interestingly, the 2025 Survey results indicated that teachers very rarely engaged students in civic leadership and voter registration. None of the respondents actively engaged students in attending community or other leadership meetings. In contrast, 80% of 5th grade teachers (N=4) included voter awareness in their classroom activities; no 8th or 11th respondents included voter awareness (Lennex and Easter, forthcoming). The Voter Registration Project and 2025 Survey both contribute to better understanding of the current state of civics education and potential improvement.

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INTRODUCTION

Engaging students in social studies, particularly civics education, is challenging. Students mainly perceive civics education to be, at best, rote memorization and at worst, dreaded listening to droning lectures from stuffy city officials. Evidence in the commonwealth of Kentucky suggests that citizens are lacking in civic awareness and participation (CHI, 2023). With Civics education in Kentucky also having gained momentum with legislation requiring all high school graduates beginning in the 2025-2026 academic year to earn a credit in Civics (KRS 158.141(1), 2025), in what way(s) are teachers currently engaging with civics content? To answer that question, two projects were undertaken: The Voter Registration Project and a 2025 Survey of 5-12 teachers. The Voter Registration Project is all about empowering and educating our young voters, increasing voter registration and civic engagement, and actively participating in civic engagement. With this thought, high school social studies student teachers and their cooperating teachers were rallied to hold voter registration events at three Eastern Kentucky high schools during Spring 2024. Nearly 350 students registered to vote. An additional college campus event in Fall 2025 registered more than 100 students. The survey results indicated that teachers very rarely engaged students in civic leadership and voter registration. None of the respondents actively engaged students in attending community or other leadership meetings. In contrast, 80% of 5th grade teachers (N=4) included voter awareness in their classroom activities; no 8th or 11th respondents included voter awareness. (Lennex & Easter, 2026). The Voter Registration Project and 2025 Survey both contribute to better understanding of the current state of civics education and potential improvement.

LITERATURE REVIEW

An informed and engaged citizenry begins with P-12 education. A healthy democracy includes active and engaged citizens (Galston, 2001). Social Studies P-12 curriculum varies nationally. In Kentucky, the curriculum weaves social studies themes, such as civics and geography, throughout the grades (Kentucky Academic Standards, Social Studies, 2022). While some attention in elementary, P-5, is provided to the themes each year, specific and consistent instructional time is planned for fourth-grade Kentucky social studies and fifth-grade American History. It is in the fifth-grade curriculum that students are introduced to the American Revolution and the creation of the Constitution and Bill of Rights (256). Grades Six through Eight includes curriculum spanning world and western civilization as well as American History. Eighth grade American History encompasses the American foundations in

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