Civics Education in K-12 Schools
Results of a National Survey
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The Education Week Research Center conducts surveys, collects data, and performs analyses that appear in Education Week and special reports such as Quality Counts, and Technology Counts. The center also conducts independent research studies and maintains the Education Counts online data resource.

REPORT: Holly Kurtz, Director, Education Week Research Center – Sterling Lloyd, Assistant Director – Alex Harwin, Research Analyst – Michael Osher, Survey Analyst

Education Week Research Center
6935 Arlington Road
Bethesda, MD 20814
www.edweek.org/rc | rcinfo@epe.org

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Executive Summary

Between February and April of 2018, the Education Week Research Center administered an online survey to 524 principals, assistant principals, and other school-based leaders. The survey asked leaders about the structure and perceptions of civics education in their districts and schools.

Leaders reported that students spend an average of 31 hours per month on civics education. Most perceive that this is not enough time. Nearly half (44 percent) say their schools devote 11 to 25 percent of the social studies curriculum to civics.

Students get more exposure to civics via planned lessons in the classroom than through activities outside the classroom. Fewer than 1 in 3 schools offer stand-alone civics courses. However, the availability of stand-alone civics courses varies widely by grade level. Just three percent of elementaries offer such courses as compared to 23 percent of middle schools and 54 percent of high schools. When schools do offer stand-alone civics course, the class is usually required. Less than a quarter of leaders say that students in their districts must pass a civics test in order to graduate.

Leaders perceive that current events and their connection to civics are the most important topics to emphasize in civics education.

The most common civics-related activities offered by schools are community service (81 percent), student government (66 percent), and mock elections (48 percent). When offered, community service is typically not required. Most schools that do require community service also ask students to complete a follow-up project or reflection that requires them to share what they have learned.

Leaders say that their top civics-related challenge is the pressure to focus on other subjects because they are tested or emphasized. This challenge is bigger in elementary than in secondary schools and also in schools in larger districts and districts with higher percentages of low-income students.

In an open-ended question, leaders were asked what opportunities, if any, students had to express their own civic voices and rights. Student government was the most common response. Another open-ended question asked leaders to list the external organizations involved in civic education in their schools. Leaders most frequently mentioned local government agencies or political leaders, followed by Rotary International.

Most school leaders (51 percent) say the recent mass shooting in Parkland, Florida led to more student engagement in civics-related issues such as gun control. Forty percent reported that students are discussing government and politics more since the 2016 elections. Rural leaders were less likely than their urban or suburban peers to say that the Parkland shootings or the elections impacted student engagement in civics or the amount of discussion devoted to government or politics.
Introduction

As the nation has become increasingly politically divided in the wake of the 2016 Presidential elections, educators have turned their attention to civics education that might have the ability to encourage students to engage productively in public life. In addition, the February 2018 shootings at Parkland High School sparked a nationwide movement by young people concerned about violence.

In the wake of both these developments, in the winter and spring of 2018, the Education Week Research Center surveyed principals and other school leaders about the structure and perceptions of civics education in their schools.

The results of that survey are detailed in this report. They suggest that civics education is alive and well in American schools but that challenges remain. It remains to be seen whether civics education can help heal the partisan divisions in our nation.
Methodology

Between February and April of 2018, the Education Week Research Center administered an online survey to 524 principals, assistant principals, and other school-based leaders. The nationally-representative survey has a margin of error of plus or minus four percent.

Survey Details

Survey Administered: February to April 2018
Sample: Nationally-representative sample of educators
Professional Roles of Respondents: Principals, assistant principals, and other school-based leaders
Total Respondents: 524

Description of “Civics Education” Provided at the Start of Survey

In this survey, civics education is defined as the body of knowledge students learn about the democratic foundations and structures of the nation. Civics education also includes learning and practicing the civic behaviors that constitute effective participation in a democratic society.
Civics Education in K-12 Schools

Amount of Time Devoted to Civics Education

Leaders say students in their school spend an average of 31 hours per month on civics ed, but a median of 6 hours per month. The large difference between the median and the average indicates that the numbers of hours per month varies widely.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Median hours per month spent on civics education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Are Schools Devoting Enough Time to Civics?

Most leaders say their schools are devoting too little time to civics education. Only one respondent said her school was devoting too much time to civics.
Views of Time Spent on Civics By Grade

Elementary leaders are more likely than their secondary school peers to report that they spend too little time on civics education.

In your opinion, how much time does your school devote to civics education?

- Elementary: 61% Too little, 38% The right amount
- Middle: 57% Too little, 43% The right amount
- High: 41% Too little, 59% The right amount
Views of Time Spent on Civics By Locale

Urban leaders are significantly more likely than their suburban or rural colleagues to say that their schools devote too little time to civics.

In your opinion, how much time does your school devote to civics education?

- Rural/town: 49% Too little, 51% The right amount
- Suburban: 44% Too little, 56% The right amount
- Urban: 69% Too little, 31% The right amount
Views of Time Spent on Civics By Poverty

Leaders at higher-poverty schools are more likely to perceive that too little time is devoted to civics education.

In your opinion, how much time does your school devote to civics education?

- More than 50% low-income students: 64% Too little, 36% The right amount
- 50% or less low-income students: 44% Too little, 56% The right amount
Nearly half of leaders (44 percent) say that 11 to 25 percent of their schools’ social studies curricula are devoted to civics.
Middle schools focus the largest portion of their social studies curricula to civics: 37 percent devote at least 26 percent of their curricula as compared to 25 percent of high schools and 18 percent of elementaries.

What proportion of your school’s social studies or history curriculum focuses on civics?

- High: 25% 50% 22%
- Middle: 22% 39% 31% 6%
- Elementary: 44% 37% 15%

- None 1-10% 11-25% 26-50% More than 50%
Civics Education Inside and Outside the Classroom

Most leaders report that their students get more exposure to civics inside the classroom (via planned lessons such as in-class teaching, projects, or assignments) than outside the classroom (via activities such as volunteering or activism).

Do students at your school get more exposure to civics education through planned lessons in the classroom or through activities outside the classroom?

- More exposure through planned lessons
- Equal amounts of exposure through planned activities and activities outside the classroom
- More exposure through activities outside the classroom
Civics Education Inside and Outside the Classroom By Poverty

Compared to their peers at lower-poverty schools, students at higher-poverty schools get more exposure to civics through planned lessons.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>More than 50% low-income students</th>
<th>50% or less low-income students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>66%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- More exposure through planned lessons
- More exposure through activities outside the classroom
- Equal exposure through planned activities and activities outside the classroom

Do students at your school get more exposure to civics education through planned lessons in the classroom or through activities outside the classroom?
Civics-related Activities Offered at Schools

A majority of leaders say their schools offer students opportunities to perform community service and participate in student government. Mock elections and debate are offered at less than half of the leaders’ schools.

Which of the following civics-related activities does your school offer to its students? Select all that apply.

- Community service: 81%
- Student government: 66%
- Mock elections: 48%
- Debate: 38%
- Other: 21%
Civics-related Activities Offered at Schools By Grade

High schools are more likely than elementary or middle schools to offer student government, community service, and debate. Middle schools are most likely to offer mock elections.

Which of the following civics-related activities does your school offer to its students? Select all that apply.
Civics-related Activities Offered at Schools By Locale

Community service and debate are both less common in rural/town schools than in urban or suburban areas.

Which of the following civics-related activities does your school offer to its students? Select all that apply.
Civics-related Activities Offered at Schools By Poverty

Higher-poverty schools are less likely to offer either student government or debate.

Which of the following civics-related activities does your school offer to its students? Select all that apply.
Students Opportunities to Express Civic Voices and Rights

The survey included an open-ended question that asked what opportunities, if any, students have to express their own civic voices and rights. Student government was the most common response. Number 2 was classroom assignments, debates, and discussions.

| What, if any, opportunities do students at your school have to express their own civic voices and rights? |
|-------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Student government                              | 36% |
| Classroom assignments, debates, and discussions | 33% |
| Students are generally encouraged to meet and/or express views | 17% |
| Student clubs and organizations                 | 13% |
| Essays, journalism, letters, and petitions      | 9%  |
| Advisory boards, committees, focus groups, and surveys | 8%  |
| Community service, charitable or volunteer action, service-based projects | 6%  |
| Organized protest/walkout                       | 4%  |
| Citizenship or leadership courses and programs  | 3%  |
| Other                                           | 10% |
| Limited/none                                    | 6%  |
| NA                                              | 1%  |
| I don't know                                    | 1%  |
Community Service Requirements

Most leaders say their schools do not require community service.

Are students at your school required to perform community service?

- Yes: 59%
- No: 41%
Follow-ups/Reflections on Community Service

Most schools that do require community service also require a follow-up project or reflection in which students share what they have learned.

Does the required community service program include a follow-up project or reflection that requires students to share what they have learned?

- Yes: 45%
- No: 55%
Stand-alone Civics Courses

Fewer than 1 in 3 schools offer stand-alone civics courses.

Does your school offer a stand-alone civics course?

- Yes: 70%
- No: 30%
Stand-alone Civics Courses By Grade

The availability of stand-alone civics courses varies widely by grade level. Just three percent of elementaries offer such courses as compared to 23 percent of middle schools and 54 percent of high schools.
Requiring Stand-alone Civics Courses

The majority of schools that do offer stand-alone civics courses require them.
Civics Exams

Less than a quarter of school leaders report that students in their districts are required to pass a civics test in order to graduate.

Do students in your school district have to pass a civics test in order to graduate?

- Yes: 76%
- No: 24%
Top Topics to Emphasize in Civics Education

School leaders say that current events and their connection to civics are the most important topics to emphasize in civics education.

Which of the following topics is most important to emphasize in civics education?

- Current events and their connection to civics: 34%
- The Constitution and constitutional rights: 27%
- Civic participation/voting: 22%
- Civic foundations/history: 9%
- U.S. government politics and policy: 8%
Top Topics to Emphasize in Civics Education By District Size

Compared to their peers from smaller districts, school leaders from larger districts place a greater emphasis on current events and their connection to civics.

Which of the following topics is most important to emphasize in civics education?

- U.S. government, politics, and policies
- Civic foundations/history
- Civic participation/voting
- The Constitution and constitutional rights
- Current events and their connection to civics
Top Topics to Emphasize in Civics Education By Poverty

Leaders from higher-poverty schools place more importance on current events than do leaders from lower-poverty schools.

Which of the following topics is most important to emphasize in civics education?

- Current events and their connection to civics: 40% more than 50% low-income students, 31% 50% or less low-income students
- The Constitution and constitutional rights: 28% more than 50% low-income students, 26% 50% or less low-income students
- Civic participation/voting: 22% more than 50% low-income students, 23% 50% or less low-income students
- U.S. government politics and policies: 5% more than 50% low-income students, 10% 50% or less low-income students
- Civics foundation/history: 5% more than 50% low-income students, 11% 50% or less low-income students
Civics-related Challenges

Obstacles to Teaching Civics

School leaders’ top civics-related challenge is pressure to focus on subjects other than civics because they are tested or emphasized.

When it comes to obstacles to teaching civics at your school, how much of a challenge are the following considerations?

- Pressure to focus on subjects other than civics because they are tested or emphasized: 21% Not much of a challenge, 28% Somewhat challenging, 27% Challenging, 24% Very challenging
- Civics education is not a district or school priority: 41% Not much of a challenge, 34% Somewhat challenging, 15% Challenging, 10% Very challenging
- Resources (i.e., textbooks, materials): 36% Not much of a challenge, 36% Somewhat challenging, 23% Challenging, 6% Very challenging
- Civics is too political/controversial: 47% Not much of a challenge, 34% Somewhat challenging, 14% Challenging
- Lack of student interest in the subject: 42% Not much of a challenge, 41% Somewhat challenging, 14% Challenging
- Teacher training: 44% Not much of a challenge, 40% Somewhat challenging, 13% Challenging

*Note: Totals may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding.
Civics Challenges by Grade Level

Elementary leaders find a variety of civics-related problems more challenging than do their secondary school peers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent who find civics-related problems “very challenging”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pressure to focus on subjects other than civics because they are tested or emphasized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civics education is not a district or school priority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources (i.e., textbooks, materials)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civics is too political/controversial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of student interest in the subject</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Civics-related Challenges Vary by District Size

Compared to their colleagues from smaller districts, school leaders from districts with 10,000 or more students perceive more pressure to focus on subjects other than civics because they are tested or emphasized.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of challenge: Pressure to focus on subjects other than civics because they are tested or emphasized</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10,000 or more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2,500-9,999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-2,499</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Not much of a challenge
- Somewhat challenging
- Challenging
- Very challenging
Civics Education as a Priority

School leaders from larger districts are also more likely to say that civics education is not a school or district priority.

Level of challenge: Civics education is not a district or school priority

![Bar chart showing the level of challenge for civics education in different district sizes.](chart.png)
Civics Challenges Vary by Locale

Teacher training and resources are bigger civics challenges for urban than for rural or suburban school leaders. Compared to their urban and rural peers, suburban school leaders are less likely to report that civics education is not a district or school priority.

Percent who say the issue is “very challenging”

- Civics education is not a school or district priority: 13% urban, 4% suburban, 2% rural.
- Resources (i.e., textbooks, materials): 12% urban, 7% suburban, 2% rural.
- Teacher training: 10% urban, 2% suburban, 2% rural.
Leaders in Higher-poverty Districts Face Greater Civics-related Challenges

Compared to their colleagues in lower-poverty districts, leaders in higher-poverty districts perceive a higher level of challenge related to civics education.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent who say the issue is “very challenging”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pressure to focus on subjects other than civics because they are tested or emphasized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civics education is not a school or district priority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources (i.e., textbooks, materials)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of student interest in the subject</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

More than 50% low-income students  50% or less low-income students
External Influences on Civics Education

External Organizations Involved in Civic Education in Schools

An open-ended question asked leaders to list external organizations involved in civic education at their schools. Respondents cited 72 different organizations. The top 21 (all the organizations mentioned by more than one respondent) are listed in the chart on this page. Leaders most frequently cited local government agencies or political leaders.

- Local government agencies, political leaders: 28%
- Rotary International: 10%
- Local charities, community groups: 9%
- Veterans of Foreign Wars: 8%
- The American Legion: 7%
- National Honors Society: 6%
- Local churches: 4%
- Lions Clubs International: 4%
- Kiwanis International: 3%
- Key Club: 3%
- Junior Achievement USA: 3%
- National Future Farmers of America: 3%
- Boy Scouts of America: 3%
- Local colleges/universities: 2%
- Local businesses: 2%
- Local parent groups: 2%
- Sons of the American Revolution: 2%
- The National Exchange Club: 2%
- YMCA of the USA: 2%
- Constitutional Rights Foundation: 2%
- United Way: 2%

List any organizations that are external to your school that are involved in civics education efforts at your school.
The Parkland Shootings Impact on Student Engagement in Civics-Related Issues

Most school leaders (51 percent) say the recent mass shooting in Parkland, Florida led to more student engagement in civics-related issues such as gun control. Nearly as many (48 percent) say the shooting had no impact on engagement.
The Parkland shootings had a greater impact on engagement in secondary schools than in elementaries.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade Level</th>
<th>More Engaged</th>
<th>Less Engaged</th>
<th>Not Impacted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Students are more engaged
Students are less engaged
The shooting did not impact engagement
How, if at all, has the recent mass shooting in Parkland, Florida impacted engagement of students at your school around civics-related issues like gun control?

The shootings had the biggest impact in suburban schools and the smallest impact in rural areas.

Note: Totals may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding.
Impact of The 2016 Presidential Elections

Most school leaders (53 percent) say the 2016 presidential elections did not impact the amount of student discussion about government and politics. More than 40 percent report that students are discussing government and politics more since the elections.

Are students at your school discussing government and politics more, less, or the same amount since the 2016 presidential elections?

- More discussion: 5%
- The same amount of discussion: 41%
- Less discussion: 53%

Note: Totals may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding.
Election Impact By Grade Level

The elections were more likely to increase the amount of discussion about government and politics in secondary schools. A majority of middle school leaders (51 percent) reported that the amount of discussion increased.

Are students at your school discussing government and politics more, less, or the same amount since the 2016 presidential elections?

- High: 6% Less, 47% The same, 48% More
- Middle: 46% Less, 51% The same
- Elementary: 8% Less, 61% The same, 31% More

Note: Totals may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding.
Election Impact By Locale

Rural leaders were less likely than urban or suburban peers to report that the amount of discussion about government and politics increased after the elections.

Are students at your school discussing government and politics more, less, or the same amount since the 2016 presidential elections?

- Urban: 6% Less discussion, 49% The same amount of discussion, 45% More discussion
- Suburban: 6% Less discussion, 44% The same amount of discussion, 52% More discussion
- Rural/town: 6% Less discussion, 64% The same amount of discussion, 30% More discussion
Respondent Demographics

Survey Respondents By Region

Respondents hailed from every state/jurisdiction in the nation except for Alaska, the District of Columbia, Hawaii, and North Dakota. More than 1 in 3 respondents work in the South.
Locale

Thirty-nine percent of survey respondents work in rural schools.

Which of the following best describes the location of your school?
Grade Level

Forty percent of respondents work in high schools.

Which of the following best describes the school where you work?

- Elementary school
- Middle school
- High school
- Other
District Size

Most respondents work in schools located in districts with fewer than 2,500 students.
District Poverty Rates

Sixty percent of respondents work in districts in which half the students or less are low income.

Which of the following best describes the percentage of low-income students in your district?