

Civic Knowledge Research Brief

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The EAD Research and Evaluation Task Force is pleased to share these research briefs which summarize findings from research on various practices and priorities associated with EAD. The authors of each brief were asked to highlight main findings from research on the given subject. Additional briefs are in process and will be released periodically

Why Civic Knowledge?



A reasonable level of civic knowledge—factual information about government, politics, and public affairs—within the population is a priority to ensure an informed electorate, all the more

so given contemporary concerns about the prevalence of mis- and disinformation. An informed electorate is essential for holding elected officials accountable for their policy decisions, the bedrock principle of a representative democracy such as the United States.

While scholars of democracy debate *what* and *how much* information is required of the citizenry within a democratic society, they generally agree that an informed electorate requires a *minimum* level of such knowledge. This scholarly consensus is consistent with Educating for American Democracy’s goal of “empowering educators to develop a generation of . . . informed citizens”.¹ Furthermore, as democracy rests on rule by the people, it is important that this knowledge be shared widely. As stated in the first of the EAD Pedagogical Principles, EAD teachers “assume *all* students’ capacity for

learning complex and rigorous content” (emphasis added).²

In the research to date, two practices that have been shown to increase young people’s level of knowledge are assessments with accountability, specifically subject-area exams, and an open classroom climate in which issues are freely and fairly discussed

Assessment

The EAD Pedagogical Principles call for teachers to “use assessments as a tool to ensure all students understand civics content and concepts and apply civic skills and agency.”³ Extant research supports this call for meaningful assessments to ensure accountability, both of what instructors are teaching and students are learning. Research has shown that such exams, *when accompanied by a civics curriculum*, can boost students’ level of knowledge, as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress, and that this increased knowledge persists after graduation—particularly for those students who are less likely to have learned about



¹ Pedagogical Companion to the Roadmap to Educating for American Democracy: 1.

² Pedagogical Companion: 5.

³ Pedagogical Companion: 6.

the U.S. political system in the home.⁴ Importantly, existing evidence does not lead to the conclusion that requiring an exam alone is a panacea for increased knowledge.

Classroom Discussion



Multiple studies of civic education have found that robust discussion of real-world issues, in which students are free to express their views in an environment of mutual respect,

correlates with higher levels of knowledge for all students.⁵ The positive impact of an open classroom climate is not concentrated among students with either high or low socioeconomic status.

In sum, the existing research into effective practices is wholly supportive of the pedagogical practices emphasized by Educating for American Democracy. Both rigorous assessments and open classroom discussion align with the Exemplar Outcome that students will “hold high expectations for their civic learning to be rigorous, supportive, and relevant.”

Challenges

While the subject of civics may appear to be rife with discord, there is more agreement on civics

content than suggested by the headlines. For example, consensus has quietly been achieved in the form of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Civics Exam. The exam is designed by educators and meets with little criticism. When many observers raised alarms about the drop in NAEP civics scores in 2022,⁶ the validity of the exam itself was rarely if ever questioned.

The current political climate also hinders the discussion of contemporary issues in the classroom. In spite of the evidence that open classroom discussion of political and social issues is an effective method of enhancing knowledge, many teachers are increasingly wary of fostering such conversations. A number of states have enacted laws proscribing the discussion of race and sexuality in the classroom; there has also been controversy over the material covered in civics textbooks.⁷ And even in places without such legislation or controversies, teachers and administrators often report parental complaints about classroom instruction.⁸

In conclusion, there is more consensus on both the need to emphasize knowledge in civic education and the means to do so than the national discourse would suggest. At the same time, there is a tragic irony that the method of civics instruction—classroom discussion of contemporary issues—shown to be most effective for increasing knowledge is also the one that educators are increasingly reluctant to adopt.

⁴ David E. Campbell and Richard G. Niemi, “Testing Civics: State-Level Civic Education Requirements and Political Knowledge,” *American Political Science Review* 110, no. 3 (2016): 495–511.

⁵ David E. Campbell, “Voice in the Classroom: How an Open Classroom Climate Fosters Political Engagement Among Adolescents,” *Political Behavior* 30, no. 4 (2008): 437–54; Allison M. Martens and Jason Gainous, “Civic Education and Democratic Capacity: How Do Teachers Teach and What Works,” *Social Science Quarterly* 94, no. 4 (2012): 956–76; Jason Gainous and Allison M. Martens, “The Effectiveness of Civic Education: Are ‘Good’ Teachers Actually Good for ‘All’ Students?,” *American Politics Research* 40, no. 2 (March 2012): 232–66, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532673X11419492>; Richard G. Niemi and Jane Junn, *Civic Education: What Makes Students Learn* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); Judith Torney-Purta, “The School’s Role in Developing Civic Engagement: A Study of Adolescents in Twenty-Eight Countries,” *Applied Developmental Science* 6, no. 4 (2002): 203–12.

⁶ CIRCLE, “NAEP History and Civics Scores Are a Call to Action on Equitable Civic Learning,” May 8, 2023, <https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/naep-history-and-civics-scores-are-call-action-equitable-civic-learning>; Kevin Mahnken, “Steep Drop in Student History Scores Leaves Officials ‘Very, Very Concerned,’” May 3, 2023, <https://www.the74million.org/article/report-card-naep-eighth-graders-civics-history-declines/>.

⁷ Ashley Woo et al., “Walking a Fine Line—Educators’ Views on Politicized Topics in Schooling: Findings from the State of the American Teacher and State of the American Principal Surveys” (RAND Corporation, August 10, 2022), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1108-5.html.

⁸ John Rogers & Joseph Kahne, with Michael Ishimoto, Alexander Kwako, Samuel Stern, Cicely Bingener, Leah Raphael, Samia Alkam, & Yvette Conde, (2022). *Educating for a Diverse Democracy: The Chilling Role of Political Conflict in Blue, Purple, and Red Communities*. Los Angeles, CA: UCLA’s Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access. <https://idea.gseis.ucla.edu/publications/educating-for-a-diverse-democracy/>

Educating for American Democracy presents an opportunity for educators to demonstrate how such discussions, held in a respectful environment and accompanied by rigorous assessment, can lead to a more informed citizenry.