

# Educating for Civic Reasoning and Discourse

## Recommendations for Practice, Policy, and Research

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The goal of the National Academy of Education (NAEd) Civic Reasoning and Discourse initiative is to better prepare students to examine and discuss complex civic, political, and social issues by ensuring that the curricula, pedagogy, and learning environments that they experience are informed by the best available evidence and practice. This includes identifying opportunities to learn from well-established areas of interdisciplinary research on human learning and development, as well as current exemplars of instructional practice.

Civic reasoning and discourse skills are essential for students to develop as they prepare for citizenship, adulthood, and for becoming active members of the communities of which they are a part. Indeed, developing these civic capabilities is essential for the functioning of democracy itself. The subject of this report could not be more relevant as institutions and norms of democracy are increasingly being stress tested, as was tragically seen in the violent insurrection at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021. In addition, political polarization, the proliferating use (and misuse) of social media,

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<sup>1</sup> In this final chapter, the authors present recommendations for practice, policy, and research, which are synthesized from materials in preceding chapters and in consultation and agreement with the steering committee.

### Fundamental Questions Guiding the Report

- What are the cognitive, social, emotional, ethical, and identity dimensions entailed in civic reasoning and discourse, and how do these dimensions evolve? In particular, how do students develop an understanding of implicit bias and learn to weigh multiple points of view? How do educators understand the demands of conceptual change?
- What can we discover from research on learning and human development to cultivate competencies in civic reasoning and discourse and prepare young people as civic actors?
- What are the broader ecological contexts that influence the ability of our learning systems to support the development of these competencies? How do we create classroom climates and inquiry-oriented curricula that are meaningful to students' civic learning?
- In the context of schooling, what is the role of learning across content areas—social studies, geography, history, literacy/language arts, mathematics, and science—in developing multiple competencies required for effective civic reasoning and discourse? What are the pedagogical implications in these content areas?
- What supports are needed in terms of policy as well as in the preparation and professional development of teachers and school administrators to design instruction for effective civic reasoning and discourse that encourages democratic values and democratic decision making?

the spread of misinformation, and an erosion of public trust in democratic institutions, procedures, and principles present challenges for young people today as they navigate through information overload and learn to analyze competing claims. Of additional concern is the level of civic knowledge that has remained stagnant, with relatively low levels of student proficiency measured over the past two decades on the National Assessment of Educational Progress Civics Assessment (1998, 2006, 2010, 2014, 2018). Gaps based on race, ethnicity, and income are also present, highlighting the need to improve both access and quality of instruction for students from marginalized groups.

Despite these challenges, there is also reason for hope. Young people are finding and making their voices heard in debates, social movements, and other civic activities aimed at expanding the promise of liberty and equality for all. Students are also demonstrating individual and collective efficacy by addressing critical social problems affecting their generation and their communities on a range of issues from standing up to gun violence to building awareness of climate change.

All together, these realities underscore the centrality and importance for students to develop civic reasoning and discourse skills as part of their learning and development. In response to this need, the NAEd Civic Reasoning and Discourse initiative argues for a more robust and comprehensive form of civic reasoning and discourse education that goes beyond traditional civic education, government, and social studies classes that many students currently experience, if such classes are offered at all. It is important to note that the recommendations in this chapter are intended to be an enhancement to, not a replacement for, these classes. The authors believe that students must have a fundamental understanding of the history, values, and responsibilities of democracy and democratic processes to fulfill their civic roles (including electoral participation). They must learn to examine the complexities and conflicts of current and historical efforts to institutionalize democratic processes and values. This involves a wide range

of knowledge and dispositions involved in valuing complexity and the consideration of ethical dimensions of decision making.

The authors also recognize, however, that practice and research as they currently exist in more traditional forms of civic and democracy education are underdeveloped. To inform best practices, education researchers and practitioners need to draw insights from a broader disciplinary knowledge base to better understand how abilities in civic reasoning and discourse develop and what pedagogical practices are appropriate and suitable in various contexts. As such, one of the major contributions of this report is to connect basic research on student learning and what is entailed in learning the subject-matter disciplines to education in civic reasoning and discourse. The authors also believe in the centrality of inquiry and critical thinking skills that draw on a student's experiences, as well as developing empathy for others and the willingness to consider multiple points of view.

Developed under the guidance of an expert steering committee, this report provides a review and synthesis of current research, scholarship, and best practices to better understand the complexities involved in education for civic reasoning and discourse. In this concluding chapter, the authors outline a more comprehensive agenda, including recommendations for educational practice, policy, and further research.

Early in its work, the steering committee agreed on a shared definition of civic reasoning and discourse to guide the development of this report. The central question guiding the formulation of this definition concerns "What should we do?" and the "we" includes anyone in a group or community, regardless of their citizenship status. To engage in civic reasoning, one needs to think through a public issue using rigorous inquiry skills and methods to weigh different points of view and examine available evidence. Civic discourse concerns how to communicate with one another around the challenges of public issues in order to enhance both individual and group understanding. It also involves enabling effective decision making aimed at finding consensus, compromise, or in some cases, confronting social injustices through dissent. Finally, engaging in civic discourse should be guided by respect for fundamental human rights.

In addition to this shared definition of civic discourse and reasoning, the development of this report was guided by the following key propositions: (1) that learning to engage in civic reasoning and discourse is complex and should be addressed across the K-12 sector and across the curriculum; (2) that it needs to take into account the cognitive, social, emotional, ethical, and developmental demands of such learning; (3) that there is a need to situate the challenges of such teaching and learning in historical and ecological contexts; and (4) that preparing students with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions for civic reasoning and discourse is critical for their future civic, electoral, and community participation.

To operationalize its work, the steering committee identified key topics for working panels based on the current state of research in the field as well as the potential for new interdisciplinary linkages. These foci include (1) philosophical foundations and moral reasoning in civics; (2) learning sciences and human development (covering cognition and its relationship to identity, development across the life course, and implicit bias); (3) history of education for democratic citizenship; (4) agency and resilience in the face of challenge in education for civic action across ethnic communities; (5) ecological contexts; (6) learning environment, school climate, and other supports

for civic engagement; (7) digital literacy and the health of democratic practice; and (8) pedagogical practices and how teachers learn. Working panels were represented by leaders in each respective discipline and included emerging scholars (see Appendix A for steering committee, chapter authors, and panel members).

During the course of this project, input was also received from stakeholders and practitioners in the field of civic education during a 2-day workshop held in March 2020, an interactive virtual plenary session in November 2020, and through requested comments on earlier drafts of the chapters and recommendations included in this report (see Appendix B for workshop agendas and participant lists). The steering committee benefited from having this input along with material from the preceding chapters to inform the synthesis and development of key recommendations for practice, policy, and research.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE, POLICY, AND RESEARCH

To prepare young people to engage in a complex civic problem space, they need to develop a body of knowledge, skills, values, and dispositions to become active and responsible civic agents. Students need an interdisciplinary knowledge base to critically engage in civic topics because real-world issues inevitably reflect multiple content areas in which students are learning. Development of empathy and dispositions to value complexity are additional important dimensions that prepare students to combat individual biases, acquire skills to participate in dialogue with those holding different points of view, and find compromises rooted in democratic ideals. These include engaging in moral reasoning, ethical concern for both the self and others, and identity commitments when considering multiple points of view and examining one's own assumptions.

As settings of learning and development, schools and other institutions also need to be cognizant of the larger societal contexts in which students live their daily lives in order to create a sense of belonging and connection. To do so, teachers and schools need to create learning environments that respect individuals' experiences, welcome all student voices, and structure opportunities for meaningful discussions. It is also critical to build on students' strengths and resiliencies to cultivate a sense of civic efficacy and for students to envision themselves as active civic participants. Finally, schools need to devote sufficient resources to creating innovative spaces for students where they can connect subject-matter content and other aspects of disciplinary knowledge to real-world issues in order to effectively develop civic efficacy and abilities to participate.

The following recommendations for practice, policy, and further research were carefully developed by the steering committee and reflect a synthesis of eight subpanels, whose work is reported in the preceding chapters in this report. These recommendations were also developed with insights from key stakeholders and educators who participated in public forums and provided invited comments. The authors recognize that the implementation of these comprehensive recommendations will be a challenging process, especially given the distributed nature of decision making in our republic, and perhaps involves the kind of civic reasoning and discourse among stakeholders that this report encourages.

## Recommendations for Practice

### I. **Education for civic reasoning and discourse should integrate issues of identity development as well as moral and ethical development.**

- The curriculum and learning environment that students experience should validate the unique life experiences of all students. Educators and parents should be aware that the perspectives and experiences of students are informed by cultural contexts, including the societal position of students and their families. This includes having an awareness that student learning can build on the intergenerational resiliencies and strengths embedded in the historical-cultural histories of their communities.
- Educators, policy makers, and parents should recognize that abilities for civic reasoning and discourse develops over time. For example, young children have the capacity for empathy, and elementary students' thinking about civic issues is personalized and based on everyday experiences. The abilities that students have to discuss social and ethical problems increase across the middle school years at which time students are able to discuss more complex scenarios and to reason more formally about civic dilemmas.
- Educators, policy makers, and parents should understand the importance and developmental necessity of discussing complex, challenging, and controversial civic and societal topics.
- Teaching civic reasoning and discourse should strive for both shared understanding as well as diversity in points of view in ways that reflect our pluralistic democracy. Teachers should engage the unique and overlapping identities that students bring to the classroom while also focusing on shared democratic values of society.
- Students should develop an understanding of the sovereign relationships between Indigenous Nations and the United States and the responsibilities of recognizing and upholding these relations. Students should further develop an understanding of relationships between the United States and its territories.
- Students should learn at least two ways of thinking about citizens and citizenship. Sometimes, these words define the legal status and rights of the members of a given political entity with articulated legal rights. Students should learn who has had legal citizenship rights and consider the fairness of such arrangements. These same words can also refer to active, responsive, and critical participation in any community in which people find themselves. The latter, more aspirational meaning informs this report and its recommendations.

### II. **Learning the complex demands of civic reasoning and discourse requires attention to self-examination of implicit bias, problems of conceptual change, and weighing multiple points of view.**

- Students should cultivate an empathetic disposition to reflect on the needs, viewpoints, historical understandings, and cultural experiences of others with whom they might disagree. They should also develop a disposition to explore areas of compromise informed by democratic values and learn to disagree in ways that respect the dignity and humanity of others.

- Students should learn to identify and examine their own biases and social positions through pedagogical practices informed by research on implicit bias and the conditions that facilitate such examinations.
- Students should learn the role and mechanisms of dissent and redress in democracies.
- Students should be introduced to strategies for recognizing when bias is occurring in order to challenge preconceived ideas. Students should build an awareness that emotion-based “hot” cognition influences decision making. For example, this process involves how pre-existing attitudes and emotions influence their perceptions of and reactions to social and political issues as well as the types of information and media that they are likely to seek out.

**III. Civic learning should occur in classroom climates that are conducive to student discussion and engagement. Teachers should encourage student voice and engagement by respecting and drawing on diverse student experiences.**

- An open classroom climate makes explicit the need to show respect for others’ opinions and cultivates spaces for discussion. Real-world issues should be presented using concrete examples to draw students into the discussion.
- Teachers should carefully plan discussions with explicit instructions and ground rules for effective participation that maximizes inclusivity.
- Schools and teachers should provide multiple ways and ample opportunities to participate in lessons and discussions. They also need to ensure the diversity and flexibility of instructional topics, material, and exercises that are relevant and meaningful to students’ lived experiences.
- Teachers need to serve as role models and demonstrate how to engage in civic reasoning and discourse through teaching and facilitating group conversations and encouraging civic participation.

**IV. Education for civic reasoning and discourse should be taught through project-based, inquiry-oriented curricula and practices.**

- Teachers should guide students to identify, investigate, analyze, and discuss substantive questions and findings related to complex social issues or community concerns that are meaningful to them and consequential to their communities. Such pedagogical practices should avoid simplistic answers to complex questions, and students should also learn the particular histories and contexts of problems and issues.
- Students should learn to provide and analyze evidence for claims, discuss warrants for why evidence is credible, and anticipate potential counter claims.
- Students need to go through an iterative process of learning to develop their own points of view on public issues, including identifying the causes, consequences, and potential solutions to social problems and/or injustices. Teachers should support this *student driven* process and encourage students to identify, communicate, and advance their own informed perspectives.

**V. Learning to engage in civic reasoning and discourse should explicitly include strategies to help students gather, analyze, and thoughtfully circulate information in digital and other media, including identifying and combating misinformation.**

- Schools should help students to develop the skills they need to engage with online information and communications. This also should include development of strategies such as lateral reading across multiple sources to analyze news media sources for credibility and potential information bias.
- Schools should also help students to develop the skills they need to participate in online communication in a safe and respectful manner. Students should be informed about how to manage their online presence as well as identify, address, and avoid online abuse, bullying, and other risky behaviors.
- Civic curricula should include attention to digital forms of civic engagement (e.g., ways to communicate thoughtful and impactful perspectives and ways to manage controversial interactions online).
- Students should develop skills to identify how vested interests, ideology, and discriminatory attitudes may be involved in information campaigns that seek to influence perceptions, attitudes, and action.

**VI. All of the core subject areas can contribute to the range of knowledge, skills, and dispositions that students need to develop in order to investigate problems that emerge in the public domain.**

- Building on the vital role of social studies, other core subject areas offer deep learning opportunities for students to value complexity, examine multiple points of view, empathize with others, engage in ethical reasoning, and examine the reliability of sources of information. Each content area entails knowledge—conceptual, procedural, historical, epistemological, and ethical—that inevitably comes into play for students to tackle complex problems in the public domain. Repeated opportunities to learn in these areas across time and subject matters increase the transferability of civic reasoning and discourse skills to be applied across contexts and situations.

*Civics-Related Classes (Including Social Studies and Government)*

- Civic curricula should focus on in-depth content and conceptual knowledge of democratic practices and institutions related to local and national governance. This should include knowledge of the U.S. Constitutional framework and other democratic concepts and processes.
- Students should develop a comparative understanding of major political and economic systems. Conceptualizations and understandings of human rights both in the United States and globally should also be explored.
- Students should come to appreciate the right to vote and the necessity of getting information about candidates and issues before voting.
- Students should engage in actual democratic decision making at school. Simulations of democratic practices should also be explored for anticipated adult decision-making situations (e.g., town halls and organizational meetings).

### *Geography*

- Students should develop basic geographical concepts and map skills, with both a national and global focus, that provide the knowledge foundation and perspectives needed to examine historical events and contemporary social issues.
- Students should understand how geographical factors can shape political and economic opportunities and challenges such as climate change.

### *History*

- Historical knowledge and reasoning should be considered as an essential category of civic reasoning. It engenders contextual thinking, which requires people to investigate *how* and *why* things happened in the past, and better positions them to investigate the current events in depth.
- Students should develop skills in historical analysis of competing claims as well as the evaluation of source material (primary and secondary documents that may be part of the historical record or contemporary documents that provide us with insights—sometimes partial and sometimes biased—about historical actions and actors).
- Students should cultivate a sense that they are historical actors with a capacity for both individual and collective agency.
- The history curriculum should explore and challenge oppressive historical narratives, missing histories, and the persistence of inequities, especially those pertaining to non-dominant racial and ethnic groups as well as other marginalized populations. Students should also be aware of the progress that has been made by various groups over time, including the expansions of civil rights protections.

### *Literacy/Language Arts*

- Advanced comprehension and production skills are necessary for students to reflect, analyze, discuss, and create complex texts. These are important given that many sources of information regarding issues in the public domain are text-based.
- Students should develop, make, and critique written and oral arguments. They should also develop, make, and critique multi-modal arguments that utilize multiple symbol systems encountered in digital environments.
- Students should develop skills in analyzing bias, point of view, accuracy of evidence used to support claims, and overgeneralization in rhetoric that they experience in the public domain.
- Students should explore literature across cultural traditions and historical time periods in order to enter worlds different from their own lived experiences and to understand how other communities have faced challenges and developed resiliencies. They should also explore literature reflecting their own unique cultures and historical challenges as resources for examining how current and personal dilemmas have been interrogated.



*Mathematics*

- Students should develop sufficient conceptual and procedural mathematical knowledge and habits of mind in order to frame, problematize, and critically examine claims made in the public arena that include mathematical data as evidence for claims.
- Students should acquire knowledge and skills in probabilistic reasoning, statistical inference, and interpreting mathematically-based representations such as data displays because such thinking is often employed when addressing problems in the civic domain.
- Students should develop computer science skills to analyze problems and understand how advanced modeling can address real-world problems. This includes understanding how algorithms in digital environments structure access and opportunity.

*Science*

- Students should cultivate an understanding of and respect for the explanatory power of science, including the values and propositions that shape the development of scientific knowledge and reasoning.
- Students should develop sufficient conceptual and critical inquiry skills in order to understand and evaluate claims and evidence that shape policies concerning scientific issues and society (e.g., public health and climate challenges).
- Students should develop effective skills for seeking out and analyzing reliable scientific sources, deliberating with different audiences in the public domain, and engaging in evidence-informed decision making.
- Students should develop an understanding of science as an institution as well as informed insights into its history and limitations. This includes how science is organized, regulated, and funded; the role of research vetting procedures and replication of findings; how ideologies may influence what is studied; and how science affects society.
- Students should build an awareness of and interest in contributing to citizen- and community-based science opportunities across the lifespan.

**VII. Teachers and administrators should be effectively prepared to create high-quality civic learning opportunities that (a) are addressed across the curriculum, (b) build on the strengths and experiences of students, and (c) take students' developmental needs and trajectories into account.**

- Ongoing professional development should be organized for teachers and administrators to learn about, implement, and reflect on their experiences in delivering the kind of civic learning opportunities discussed in this report. Professional development should model inquiry-oriented pedagogies with carefully planned and facilitated discussions.
- Professional development opportunities should address and assess how issues of identity are entailed in civic reasoning and discourse. Teachers and administrators should develop an understanding that students' identity development

is influenced by their experiences in the world. Teachers and administrators should also engage in self-reflection of their own identities, as these impact their teaching. These should be addressed both in teacher preparation programs and during ongoing professional development.

- Teacher preparation programs should recruit teacher candidates from different backgrounds to welcome diverse voices into the teacher workforce.
- Teachers and administrators should understand that engaging students in complex or controversial topics is important and necessary for their learning and development.
- Teachers and administrators should receive training in and tools for planning and facilitating student discussion of complex and/or controversial civic and social subjects across subject matters.
- In-service teachers should have sufficient planning and instruction time for collaborative opportunities to study how to engage students in civic reasoning and discourse within and across subject matters.

### Recommendations for Policy

#### *State and Local Standards*

#### **VIII. School systems should require courses in U.S. government and citizenship to be taught at both the middle school and high school levels.**

- These courses should include studying and debating political processes and principles such as those found in the fundamental documents of democracy. They should also include historical grounding of how political processes, principles, and protections have evolved over time.
- Students should understand the process of free and fair elections along with other modes of citizens' participation.
- These courses should also address civic reasoning and discourse as discussed in this report.
- School systems should encourage multiple opportunities across the K–12 spectrum for students to engage in civic learning, particularly in ways that build on their personal and community knowledge and experiences. Schools should consider expanding these courses to be taught in a full academic year.

#### **IX. State and district standards for civic learning should (a) address the whole curriculum, (b) focus on project-based, inquiry-oriented curricula and practices, (c) build on the strengths and experiences of diverse students, and (d) be developmentally appropriate.**

- Standards should address more than traditional civic knowledge. They should articulate the multiple dimensions of knowledge and dispositions required to engage in civic reasoning and discourse.
- Standards should address opportunities within and across subject matters to cultivate the development and transferability of civic reasoning and discourse skills across contexts and situations.

- Standards at the state and district levels should be written with coherence, manageability, and interdisciplinary connections in mind to avoid becoming an accumulated list of disjointed topics.
- State and district standards should include (a) explicit discussion of complex and controversial societal issues, and (b) the contributions of and challenges faced by groups based on minoritized statuses.
- Standards should require guidance for discussing controversial issues, protecting students' free expression, and teaching the difference between free expression and speech that harms the humanity, dignity, and safety of others.
- Standards should be designed in a developmentally appropriate way to ensure that the complexity of constructs and issues addressed in civics curricula are aligned with students' increasing abilities to reason about civic dilemmas across grade levels.

### *Funding and Resources*

- X. Federal government, states, and districts should ensure that adequate funding and resources are available to develop, implement, and evaluate the high-quality, whole curriculum approach to civic reasoning and discourse described in this report.**
- Federal government, states, and districts should fund the development of high-quality resources produced by cross-disciplinary teams representing the range of expertise reflected in the recommendations of this report.
  - School districts and schools should have sufficient funding and access to models for facilitating student discussion of complex and controversial topics.
  - Federal government, states, and districts should fund professional development opportunities for teachers and administrators to develop, enact, and assess civic learning across the whole curriculum utilizing inquiry-oriented pedagogies.
  - Professional development opportunities should also be funded to develop, enact, and assess the framework for learning articulated in this report.
- XI. Research infrastructures and incentives should be developed to generate up-to-date data on teaching and learning in the area of civic reasoning and discourse, including (a) conducting a prioritized review and revision of existing content frameworks and background questionnaires for the National Assessment of Educational Progress in civics and history; and (b) re-establishing and supporting participation by the United States (or individual states) in the International Civic and Citizenship Education Studies conducted by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA).**
- The National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB) currently plans to test civics and history in 2022 and 2025 at grade 8 using the existing frameworks and assessments. Assessment of civics and history at grades 4 and 12 (in addition to grade 8) is not scheduled until 2029, with reviews of the existing frameworks occurring prior to that administration. NAGB should prioritize

a review of the existing content frameworks for civics and history with consideration toward the inclusion of measures on civic reasoning, discourse, and engagement detailed in this report as early as possible. Relevant areas to be addressed include the ability to engage in deliberative discussions in ways that value complexity and differing points of view as well as the ability to examine the reliability of evidence and sources. The assessments should cover these areas while retaining sufficient items to assess trends in other civic-related areas. This review should include an examination of the student and teacher background questionnaires to gather information on opportunities that students have for acquiring civic reasoning and discourse skills (especially perceptions of classroom and school climates that encourage civic learning and participation).

- The U.S. Department of Education should support opportunities for national participation in the IEA International Civic and Citizenship Education Studies by either (1) supporting testing of a representative sample of students in the United States, or by (2) facilitating benchmarking participation by individual states. National participation could allow for the inclusion of measures closely aligned with civic reasoning and discourse skills in these tests that are administered to nationally representative samples or students across multiple countries.
- Institutions and agencies that conduct other national surveys, including longitudinal assessments, should explore opportunities to gather data on the role of students' abilities in civic reasoning and opportunities to practice civic discourse.
- Foundations and government agencies should be encouraged to establish grant programs to support research on the processes and challenges of enhancing civic reasoning and discourse of the type envisioned in this report as well as the development of methodological approaches to conduct research on these areas.

### *Role of Associations*

## **XII. Professional organizations of educators and discipline-based educational organizations should engage in dialogue both within and across organizations to consider and articulate how they could contribute to civic learning, reasoning, and discourse across the curriculum and lifespan.**

- Discipline-based educational organizations are encouraged to explore opportunities for dialogue within their memberships and constituencies on how to improve student abilities in civic reasoning and discourse. This includes both educational associations organized around subject-matter learning in particular disciplines as well as those engaged in research on education and development more broadly.
- Educational organizations should further explore topics addressed in this report through meetings with relevant sub-groups, presentations to the membership at annual meetings/workshops, and additional publications (especially directed to teachers and those who provide pre-service preparation).

## **Recommendations for Future Research**

### **Curriculum and learning environments for high-quality civic reasoning and discourse education**

- Further research in human learning and development as well as research on learning in the academic disciplines is needed to guide and evaluate the expansion of civic reasoning and discourse throughout the whole curriculum.
- Research is needed to more deeply understand interpersonal, affective, and ethical aspects of civic learning and instruction (empathy, perspective taking, and attitudes toward democratic values).
- Researchers should examine the conditions that facilitate learning to navigate difference and dissent as productive resources for expansive learning and effective decision making. This includes examining the pedagogical practices that facilitate such conditions as key features of classroom instruction.

### **Role of identity development in learning to engage in civic reasoning and discourse**

- Researchers should further examine the role of student identities—along multiple dimensions—as these are entailed in (a) engagement in civic reasoning and discourse instruction, and (b) in developing a sense of individual and collective agency.
- Researchers need to pay increased attention to the opportunities and challenges presented by out-of-school environments for students' civic learning.
- Researchers should explore the integration of research on social and emotional learning into models of learning for civic reasoning and discourse.

### **Civic reasoning and discourse in digital spaces**

- Researchers need to conduct rigorous investigation of the pedagogical practices that focus on the development of digital literacy skills, including those that focus on student safety, combating misinformation, and developing skills in identifying and challenging racist, ultra-partisan, and other manipulative and rhetorical messages.

### **Teacher preparation and teacher learning**

- Teacher preparation needs to be informed by further research on the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that teachers need to implement the recommendations for practice discussed in this report in developmentally appropriate ways. Key research areas include:
  - Cognitive, epistemological, emotional, and ethical dimensions of civic reasoning and discourse;
  - Breadth of content knowledge relevant to civic issues, both current and historical;
  - Challenges of conceptual change and implicit bias; and
  - Pedagogical practices that prepare students to engage in this broad conception of civic reasoning and discourse in ways that promote a sense of safety and self-efficacy.
- Administrators need to be informed by further research on the knowledge and skills that they need to create conditions in schools and districts that support the ongoing learning of teachers in implementing the recommendations for practice

discussed in this report. Administrators include leaders at the levels of state boards of education, district leadership, and school-level leadership.

- Researchers should focus on investigating the opposition to discussing controversial topics based on a community's sociopolitical context. This includes factors that contribute to deep oppositions and underlying principles that can facilitate stakeholders' abilities to engage in reasoning around these points of contestation.

### **Assessment**

- Assessments currently in use in schools typically target only cognitive knowledge. Research should support additional measures of and efforts to develop assessments of epistemology (e.g., valuing knowledge as simple or complex) and of ethics (e.g., knowledge entailed in ethical reasoning). However, this must be explored in expansive ways so as not to privilege any particular orientation beyond a commitment to democratic values.
- Further research is needed to conceptually and methodologically examine how to design assessments of skills and dispositions relevant to civic reasoning and discourse that go beyond content knowledge.
- Further research is needed to examine how to synthesize across broad and large-scale assessments as well as longitudinal data bases that offer insights into opportunities to learn this breadth of knowledge and dispositions.

Young people are developmentally ready and eager to take on their roles and responsibilities as civic agents. The recommendations in this report seek to create learning environments that are meaningful to students and draw from the strengths and resiliencies from their lived experiences.

The authors of this report recognize that not all students currently have the opportunities to receive high quality civic education. All stakeholders, including federal and state governments, districts and schools, teachers, families, and communities, need to work together toward improving students' abilities in civic reasoning and discourse, as well as improving the ways in which educators prepare youth to fully participate in, preserve, and advance our democracy and our democratic institutions.

As the authors wrote this report, the United States was grappling with several overlapping crises, which along with the unknown crises of the future make clear the imperative to prepare our next generation with the civic reasoning and discourse skills to answer the central question: "What should we do?"

The ability to dialogue with individuals who differ from us and to work together to confront our current and future challenges has been both facilitated and disrupted by the advancement of information technology. On the one hand, advances in information technology make possible the ability to access, generate, analyze, and communicate a broad range of information on pressing social issues. These advances also allow people to learn about and communicate with those beyond their immediate spheres, whether in service to learning about diverse cultures or to maintain diasporic ties. However, information technology has also led to increased polarization fueled by self-reinforcing social networks and media ecosystems based on similarity, with the potential for biased and misleading information and narratives shared and exchanged within them. It is important to keep in mind that we must address both the dangers and opportunities

of these technological transformations as students navigate these and other social and ecological changes that lie ahead. It is also important to recognize the power of civic reasoning and discourse to guide public action as groups with competing views work through differences, address critical issues, and participate in the electoral process. Together, we can ensure the future functioning of our democracy.

### BOX R-1

#### Other Initiatives Addressing Civic Challenges

Other important recent initiatives in the civic education space that complement the work of this report include:

- The *Educating for American Democracy (EAD)* report and roadmap identify high priority civics content areas, provide recommendations for integrating the teaching of civics and history across K–12, and highlight best practices for civic instruction. It is a joint effort of iCivics, the Edmond J. Safra Center for Ethics at Harvard University, the School of Civic and Economic Thought and Leadership at Arizona State University, and Tufts University's Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement and Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life.
- The white paper on *Equity in Civic Education*, published by Generation Citizen and iCivics, calls for policies in support of high-quality civic education across states as well as enhanced partnerships with school districts and researchers to better facilitate and develop civics curricula and instruction.
- The National Council for the Social Studies *College, Career, and Citizenship (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards* provides guidance for states and practitioners to enhance their social studies programs, specifically in the areas of civics, economics, geography, and history. The framework is organized along an inquiry arc of four dimensions: developing questions and planning inquiries; applying disciplinary tools and concepts; evaluating sources and using evidence; and communicating conclusions and taking informed action.
- The American Academy of Arts & Sciences report *Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century* provides strategies and recommendations that aim to improve the resilience of the American democracy. The report also calls for an expansion in opportunities and funding for young people to engage in national service as well as increased investment in civic educators and education to ensure civic learning across the lifespan and to prepare citizens with skills in debate and argument.

## EPILOGUE

When Carol Lee introduced this issue of preparing youth for civic reasoning, discourse, and engagement at the annual meeting of NAEEd in November 2016, none of us could have predicted the predicaments with which we would wrestle in 2020 and into 2021. Certainly the underlying inequalities around access to health care, the persistence of racism, and even the depth of political divisions were clear back in 2016. It is the case that the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these inequalities and their impacts on the lives of so many, and in particular to minoritized populations and those living in persistent inter-generational poverty. The economic impacts on the middle class, including small business owners, of restrictions imposed to protect the public from the impact of the virus have also positioned people who never thought they would stand in lines for food to suffer as well.

Yet, what is so frightening about this convergence of pandemics (the public health crisis, the economic impacts, public displays of racism, and climate change) is how extreme views and acceptance of conspiracy theories have become such a part of the public space, as seen at the U.S. Capitol insurrection on January 6, 2021:

- An insurrectionist crowd invading the Capitol, with some carrying the war flag of the southern confederacy;
- Men wearing sweatshirts that said “Camp Auschwitz” with the letters 6MNE (6 million not enough);
- Members of Congress going against congressional rules by bringing guns into the Capitol with them and refusing to go through metal detectors installed after the Capitol invasion;
- The acceptance by millions of Americans of claims that the 2020 election was fraudulent and stolen, which were espoused by elected representatives to the House and the Senate, despite more than 60 dismissed court claims, including from the U.S. Supreme Court, and despite investigation of voting in states that show no evidence of widespread fraud;
- The refusal by members of the Congress to wear masks as they interact in public meetings with their colleagues; and
- Armed militia and groups of citizens protesting and initiating cases in the courts across the nation that wearing masks in the midst of this pandemic goes against their First Amendment rights.

In public, highly educated people are seen who advocate these claims and actions as well as identify with illogical conspiracy theories among certain politicians, business people, former members of the military, and some police officers.

The authors raise these current deep challenges for several reasons. First, they argue in this report about the importance of knowledge, and not just knowledge of history and political systems, but also knowledge of the content domains that students study in school (e.g., literacy, literature, mathematics, and science). The expansion of relevant civics knowledge beyond history and the social studies is one important contribution of this report. For example, there are important content knowledge dimensions to wrestling with how to address protecting the public from the spread of the virus alongside the needs of businesses, particularly small businesses, to survive through the pandemic.



However, the examples cited above strongly support the proposition that there are other dimensions of reasoning that are essential to develop in young people if we are moving forward to wrestle with these current challenges, understanding that some version of them will arise again. It is clear that rationality alone is not sufficient to understand what leads human beings to engage in the practices described above. This is not about one's political orientation, Republican or Democrat, progressive or conservative. One can see this in the positions taken by members of the public, including politicians at all levels of government, who have gone beyond the parameters of their strict political affiliations. These challenges point to the importance of developing dispositions of empathy for the other, of considering multiple points of view, of rejecting simplistic solutions to complex problems, of examining one's own biases, and of commitments to democratic principles rooted in the fundamental belief in the human rights of all peoples, ethical dimensions of non-negotiable beliefs about right and wrong, despite one's sole self-interest. These dimensions of knowledge and dispositions cannot be cultivated in a single civics or U.S. history course or, for that matter, a single course focused on literacy or science. Opportunities to develop this range of knowledge and dispositions can only be addressed in the universal sphere of public education as an agreed-on public good. Additionally, there must be broader ecological supports for developing both the capacity and the will to provide broad-scale supports for youth and for those who work with them to develop the capacity to do this work.

Our democracy depends on this.

