

Promoting Civic Engagement Through Afterschool Programs

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT



Americans have a strong conviction for the ideal of democracy.¹ However, the data linked to indicators of a healthy democracy paint a different picture. For example, the U.S. ranks 26th in voter turnout among the 36 democracies that make up the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)² and only 1 in 4 Americans is able to name all three branches of government.³ Civic engagement starts with our nation's young people, since engagement in adolescence increases the likelihood of engagement in adulthood. As 3 in 4 superintendents agree that preparing students for engaged citizenship is a challenge for their district,⁴ afterschool and summer learning programs are critical partners to increase students' civic engagement and provide valuable hands-on experiences that help students become informed, involved, and conscientious individuals.

The Problem: Not making the grade

The United States faces a civic engagement predicament, particularly with the nation's young people.

A disengaged public. In recent years, young people have not demonstrated particularly high levels of engagement in activities that indicate a civic disposition or a drive to effect change. For instance, between 1980 and 2016, the percentage of 18-to-24-year-old voters fell well below voting rates of older aged cohorts⁵ and among 16 to 24 year olds, volunteerism consistently remains below the national average.⁶

Civics in schools is largely a second tier subject. The No Child Left Behind Act placed a greater emphasis on test-based accountability, shifting focus toward reading and math and away from subjects like civics and social studies, despite continued poor student performance in these areas.⁷ Additionally, although 42 states had at least one civics-related high school graduation course requirement, a 2018 scan of civics education found that components of a high-quality civics education, such as interactive and participatory opportunities for learning, were largely missing.⁸

Civic engagement as an equity issue. Rates of voter turnout and volunteerism, as well as circumstances hindering civic participation, indicate disparities across income levels and race and ethnicity.^{9,10} Youth of color were more likely than their white peers to cite trouble locating a polling place, finding transportation to a polling place, and encountering problems with voter identification as factors that prevented them from voting in the 2016 election.¹¹ Differences in civically-minded educational opportunities have also been documented; students in classes with a high average socioeconomic status level were more likely to report learning how laws are made, participating in service activities, and taking part in debates or panel discussions.¹²



Afterschool Can Help: Putting civic engagement into action

Involvement in civic engagement has been linked to positive short-term outcomes, including improvements in academics and behavior, connection to the community, and overall wellbeing.¹³ In the long term, civically-engaged youth are more likely to remain civically engaged as adults, are less likely to be arrested, and have higher educational attainment and income.¹⁴

Afterschool programs are essential partners in ensuring access to immersive and relevant civic engagement opportunities, providing reach into underserved communities,¹⁵ reinforcing understanding of democratic principles, and developing civic dispositions. A study of students involved in afterschool programming with civics and leadership components found that students developed agency, responsibility, persistence, strategic thinking, and the ability to apply these skills to other areas of their lives.¹⁶ Students participating in afterschool programs' service-learning components improved their grade point averages and were less likely to be suspended than students not participating in the service-learning components.¹⁷

Across the country, afterschool and summer learning programs are embedding proven, recommended practices to inspire youth to be knowledgeable, engaged, and civically minded.

Helping students know their rights and responsibilities. In order to fully participate in a democracy, individuals must be informed and understand how to participate. At [Alternatives, Inc.](#), Hampton, Va., elementary and middle schoolers choose a community need and develop a plan of action to target that need. Alternatives, Inc.'s K.I.C.K. program (Kids Involved in Community Kindness) reinforces that community is very important and everyone, regardless of age, can make a difference. High schoolers in [Equity Alliance MN's](#) Youth Executive Board (YEB) discuss topics such as implicit bias, privilege, and the history of the civil rights movement to better understand the effects of systems and structures on their lives and learn how to influence policy and practice. Lessons are scaffolded: they begin with self-reflection and team-building exercises and work up to lessons developing students' self-efficacy, agency, and leadership skills. Students in the program have established an equity team at their high school and have proposed changes to their school discipline policy.

Civic engagement and global competence

The partnership between the Afterschool Alliance and the Center for Global Education at Asia Society is fitting considering Asia Society's work on global competence. Its definition of global competence is "the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to understand and act creatively on issues of global significance," with the following recommended four domains of focus to organize educators' instructional practices and help students:

- Investigate the world
- Recognize perspectives
- Communicate ideas
- Take action

From facilitating interest in better understanding how the world works to taking action to make a difference in the world, the complementary nature of civic engagement and global competence is evident.

To learn more, visit the Center for Global Education's "[What is Global Competence](#)" web page.



Offering opportunities for students to take action. The afterschool field provides students hands-on, interactive opportunities that take lessons from the classroom into the real world. Life Service Action is [After-School All-Stars Hawaii's \(ASASHI\)](#) student-led service learning initiative where middle schoolers discuss community issues of concern to them, such as poverty, bullying, and health and fitness, and design projects to address those topics. In a 2015-2016 national survey, 89 percent of Life Service Action participants said that they are more confident in their ability to make a difference in their community, and 74 percent now volunteer because of After-School All-Stars.

Providing authentic opportunities for students to lead and govern. At [YWCA New Britain](#) House of Teens program, Conn., high school girls engage in activities intended to equip them with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to address barriers to health in their neighborhoods, speak out to generate change, and lead healthy lives. Through the program's Photovoice, girls use digital cameras to capture barriers to health in their neighborhoods and then share their recommendations and advocate for policy change to audiences such as the city mayor and school administrators.

Middle and high school students in [YMCA of Port Angeles'](#) Youth and Government program, located in rural Wash., learn about democracy through a wholly immersive experience. After discussing how to be an informed voter and a smart consumer of information, students debate current issues and learn how public policy impacts their daily lives. The program culminates with a four-day event at the state capitol. Students from YMCA Youth and Government programs across the state take over the capitol and experience policy making firsthand by introducing, debating, and voting on legislative bills. Bills signed by the student governor are shared with Washington state's legislature to consider.

Civics education best practices

The 2018 Brown Center Report on American Education describes 10 proven practices for a high-quality civics education based on education guidebooks and toolkits by the Education Commission of the States, the Council of State Governments, the National Center for Learning and Civic Engagement, and the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools:

1. Classroom instruction in civics, government, history, law, economics, and geography
2. Discussion of current events
3. Service learning
4. Extracurricular activities
5. Student participation in school governance
6. Simulations of democratic processes and procedures
7. News media literacy
8. Action civics
9. Social-emotional learning
10. School climate reform

[The 2018 Brown Center Report on American Education: How Well are American Students Learning?](#)



Conclusion

Educating and engaging students today is central to strengthening the country's democracy in the future. Promoting the goals of democracy is a collective responsibility; this obligation extends beyond the last school bell. Recent developments have provided space for collaborative efforts moving toward this goal; for example, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) includes civics as a component of a well-rounded education and supports school-community partnerships. Cross-sector efforts should involve the afterschool field, as these programs promote students' civic dispositions, bring lessons of democracy to life, and empower youth to enact change.

For more information on how afterschool and summer learning programs are fostering civic engagement, check out the full issue brief and program spotlights at: <http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/research.cfm>

Endnotes

¹ Freedom House, the George W. Bush Institute, & the Penn Biden Center for Diplomacy and Global Engagement. (2018). *The Democracy Project: Reversing a Crisis of Confidence*. Retrieved from <https://www.democracyprojectreport.org/report>

² Desilver, D. (2018). *U.S. trails most developed countries in voter turnout*. Pew Research Center. Retrieved from <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/05/21/u-s-voter-turnout-trails-most-developed-countries/>

³ The University of Pennsylvania, Annenberg Public Policy Center. *Americans' Knowledge of the Branches of Government Is Declining*. Retrieved from <https://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/americans-knowledge-of-the-branches-of-government-is-declining/>

⁴ Gallup. (2018). *Leadership Perspectives on Public Education: The Gallup 2018 Survey of K-12 School District Superintendents*.

⁵ File, T. (2017). *Voting in America: A Look at the 2016 Presidential Election* [Blog post]. United States Census Bureau. Retrieved from https://www.census.gov/newsroom/blogs/random-samplings/2017/05/voting_in_america.html

⁶ U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2016). *Volunteering in the United States—2015*. Retrieved from <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/volun.pdf>; U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2011). *Volunteering in the United States—2010*. Retrieved from https://www.bls.gov/news.release/archives/volun_01262011.pdf

⁷ Dee, T.S. & Jacob, B.A. (2010). "The Impact of No Child Left Behind on Students, Teachers, and Schools." In *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity*, No. 2. Retrieved from https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/2010b_bpea_dee.pdf

⁸ Hansen, M., Levesque, E., Valant, J., & Quintero, D. (2018). *The 2018 Brown Center Report on American Education: How Well are American Students Learning?* Brown Center on Education Policy at Brookings. Retrieved from https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/2018-Brown-Center-Report-on-American-Education_FINAL1.pdf

⁹ Pew Research Center. (2014). *The Party of Nonvoters: Younger, More Racially Diverse, More Financially Strapped*. Retrieved from <http://www.people-press.org/2014/10/31/the-party-of-nonvoters-2/#fn-20056672-1>

¹⁰ Pew Research Center. (2015). *Parenting in America: Outlook, worries, aspirations are strongly linked to financial situation*. Retrieved from <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2015/12/17/parenting-in-america/>

¹¹ The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement. (2018). *Why Youth Don't Vote—Differences by Race and Education*. Retrieved from https://civicyouth.org/why-youth-dont-vote-differences-by-race-and-education/?cat_id=405

¹² Kahne, J. & Middaugh, E. (2008). *Democracy for Some: The Civic Opportunity Gap in High School*. The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement. Retrieved from <https://civicyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/WP59Kahne.pdf>

¹³ Ludden, A.B. (2010). Engagement in School and Community Civic Activities Among Rural Adolescents. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, Vol. 40, Issue 9. Retrieved from <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10964-010-9536-3>; Davila, A. & Mora, M.T. (2007). *Civic Engagement and High School Academic Progress: An Analysis Using NELS Data*. The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement. Retrieved from <http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/WorkingPapers/WP52Mora.pdf>

¹⁴ Chan, W.Y., Ou, S., & Reynolds, A. (2014). Adolescent Civic Engagement and Adult Outcomes: An Examination among Urban Racial Minorities. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, Vol. 43, Issue 11. Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4192036/>; Society for Research in Child Development. (2018). *Civic engagement in adolescence and young adulthood beneficial for adult development*. Retrieved from https://www.eurekalert.org/pub_releases/2018-01/sfri-cei011618.php

¹⁵ Afterschool Alliance. (2014). *American After 3PM and the African-American Community*. Retrieved from <http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/documents/AA3PM-2014/African-American-AA3PM-2014-Fact-Sheet.pdf>; Afterschool Alliance. (2014). *American After 3PM and the Hispanic Community*. Retrieved from <http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/documents/AA3PM-2014/Hispanic-AA3PM-2014-Fact-Sheet.pdf>; Afterschool Alliance. (2016). *American After 3PM Special Report: Afterschool in Communities of Concentrated Poverty*. Retrieved from http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/AA3PM/Concentrated_Poverty.pdf

¹⁶ Larson, R.W. & Angus, R.M. (2011). Adolescents' Development of Skills for Agency in Youth Programs: Learning to Think Strategically. *Child Development*, Vol. 82, No. 1. Retrieved from <http://youthdev.illinois.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Larson-Angus-2011-Adolescents-development-of-skills-for-agency-in-youth-programs.pdf>

¹⁷ Tannenbaum, S.C. & Brown-Welty, S. (2006). Tandem Pedagogy: Embedding Service-Learning into an After-School Program. *Journal of Experiential Education*, Vol. 29, Issue 2. Retrieved from <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/105382590602900204>