



Introduction

Pre-K-12 students across the state need effective and equitable civic education and civic engagement opportunities. On 17th February 2021, Marylanders with “front line” expertise—classroom educators, district and state curriculum experts, nonprofit professionals providing in-school and after school programming, as well as elected officials and state business leaders—met to discuss and recognize ways in which Maryland leads the nation. They also sought to make recommendations about how to address opportunity gaps and to strengthen civics education and service-learning, this year and beyond.

The four-part summit focused on (1) Civic learning in Maryland classrooms; (2) Deliberating current and controversial issues; (3) Media literacy; and (4) Service and Experiential Learning. In the following pages, the **challenges, opportunities, best practices, insights** and **resources** shared during these four sessions are summarized from notes and transcripts from the summit registrants and attendees. This report was created by University of Maryland’s School of Public Policy with help from the College of Education and others in the Maryland Coalition for Civic Education.

Key Findings

1. The greatest perceived challenge to civic education and service-learning in Maryland according to summit registrants is current social attitudes and social problems that exist in the country. Registrants point out that economic inequity, racial inequity, and political polarization are making it more difficult for students to engage one another and take advantage of service-learning opportunities. Other common perceived challenges were what registrants viewed as shortcomings in current education policy and a lack of time devoted to civic learning in schools.
2. Teachers are asking for support when discussing politically controversial issues. Such support could look like increased training during the teacher certification process, continuing education or professional development, access to helpful resources, and a recommitment to civic education from administrators.
3. Attendees of the summit found hope for the future of civic education in Maryland in three main ways: an increase in public and teacher awareness regarding the importance of civic education, students who have become more aware and interested in addressing social problems, and new reform efforts aimed at improving civic education and service-learning.
4. Civic education is a group effort and can be taught in all subjects, not just social studies and history. Attendees called for greater collaboration between all teachers and made suggestions regarding integrating civics into math, science and art courses.

A. Registration Survey

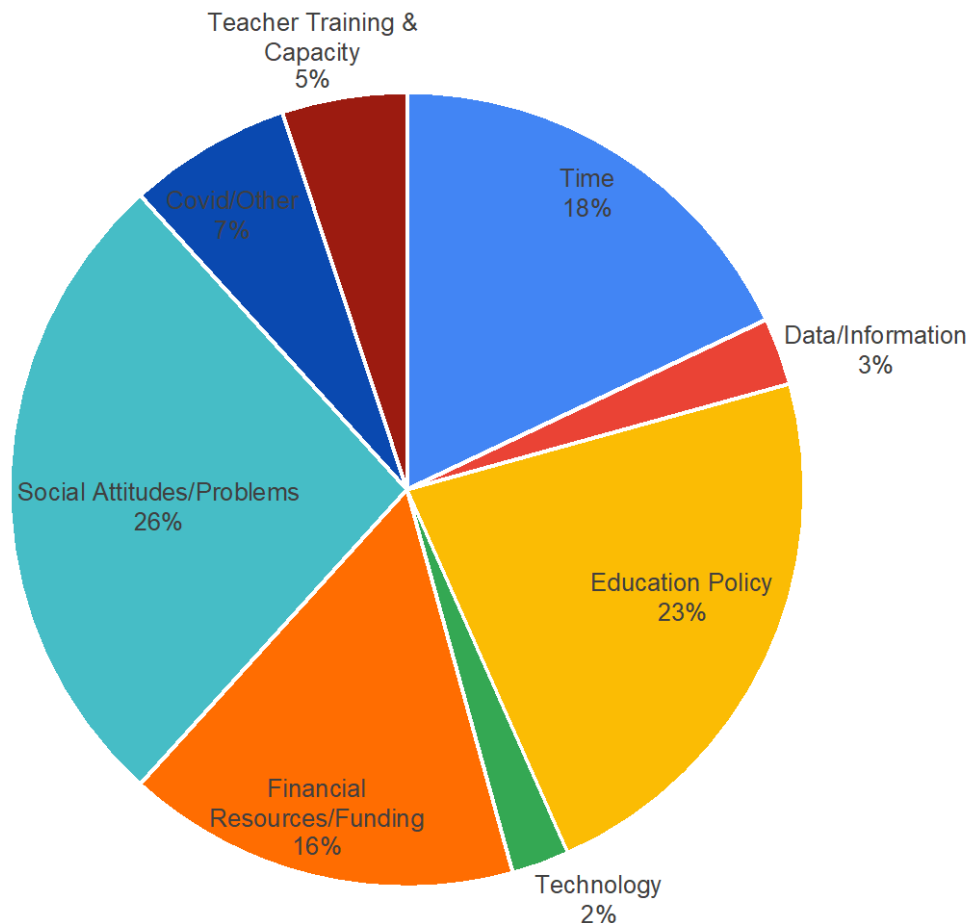
In order to attend the Maryland Civic Education summit, attendees were asked to register online. The information collected during this registration process is detailed in this section and it helps us understand broad themes regarding challenges, opportunities, and trends perceived by those involved with civic education in Maryland.

Registration Survey: Challenges

Registrants were asked, “What barriers do you see limiting civic education and engagement opportunities in Maryland public schools?” The open-ended answers were then categorized to identify commonalities among registrants. The most common challenges identified were (1) Social attitudes and social problems; (2) Current education policy; (3) Time available for civic learning; and (4) A lack of resources and/or funding.

Other challenges included a perceived shortage of teacher capacity and training, difficulties caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, technological difficulties, and a scarcity of data and information regarding civic education in Maryland.

Challenges to Civic Learning in Maryland



A student describes why they view social challenges as one of the greatest barriers to civic education below:

“I think that some things relating to politics can be upsetting to students in public schools. If a student has different beliefs than another classmate, they could get into an argument. Also, some students are very sheltered, and their parents wouldn’t want them focusing on civic education and engagement during school.”

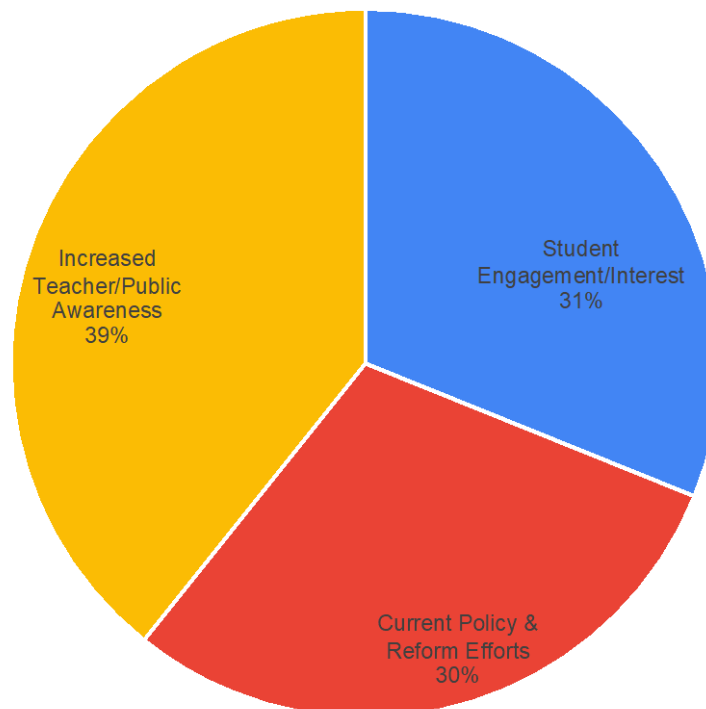
A university-affiliated registrant explains how the current education policy’s emphasis on standardized testing has made it more challenging to instruct civic-related topics in public schools.

“[There is] too much of a prescriptive curriculum and focus on testing. Not enough [places] in the curriculum for social studies as there is too much focus on STEM.”

Registration Survey: Opportunities

People who registered for the conference were asked what brings them hope for civic learning in Maryland. While these open-ended responses varied, three common themes emerged: (1) Increased teacher awareness; (2) Improved student engagement and interest; and (3) Current policy and reform efforts being undertaken at the state level.

Greatest Opportunities for Civic Learning in Maryland



A Maryland teacher explains how teacher and public awareness fosters a positive environment for civic education in the state:

“Overall, I think we have a supportive environment for open dialogue and civic education in Maryland! As a teacher in Montgomery County for the past 6 years, I have never felt in fear of losing my job or repercussions for creating lessons that include dialogue on current events and discussions of ‘-isms’ in society.

A school administrator shares how they have witnessed student engagement below:

“Baltimore City Schools student board commission [is] hosting virtual office hours to solicit feedback from more students on decisions that schools are making. Students [are] participating in school board hearings [and] sharing their experiences.”

Registration Survey: Trends

During the same registration process, attendees were asked what they felt were the greatest challenges to civic education in Maryland and what they felt brought them the greatest hope about civic learning in the state. Their answers were combined with registrants’ demographic information—the Maryland county in which they work and the type of role they play within Maryland’s civic education community—in order to ascertain any geographic, political, or social trends related to perceived challenges and opportunities to civic education in the state.

Geographic Trends

The summit organizers wondered if persons from different locales in Maryland might have differing attitudes about civic education in the state. While this may very well be true, data from the registration process found no concrete correlation between counties and the greatest perceived challenges or opportunities reported. A lack of data credible data, particularly from rural and less populous counties, might explain the difficulty in identifying such trends.

Greatest Challenges and Greatest Opportunities by Summit Registrant Roles

On the other hand, there was a relatively diverse mix of summit registrants in terms of the role they play within Maryland’s civic education community. Thus, it was possible to ascertain with greater certainty the greatest perceived challenges and opportunities to civic education by role. Below, the most common answers among the registrants are broken down by the role they play within Maryland’s civic education programming.

Community Members

- *Greatest Challenge:* Current Education Policy & Social Attitudes (tie)
- *Greatest Opportunity:* Increased Teacher / Public Awareness

Content Specialist/Supervisors

- *Greatest Challenge:* Time
- *Greatest Opportunity:* Current Policy & Reform Efforts

Out of School Civic Educators

- *Greatest Challenge:* Time
- *Greatest Opportunity:* Increased Teacher / Public Awareness

Policymakers

- *Greatest Challenge:* Time
- *Greatest Opportunity:* Increased Teacher / Public Awareness

School Administrators

- *Greatest Challenge:* Current Education Policy
- *Greatest Opportunity:* Increased Teacher / Public Awareness

Students

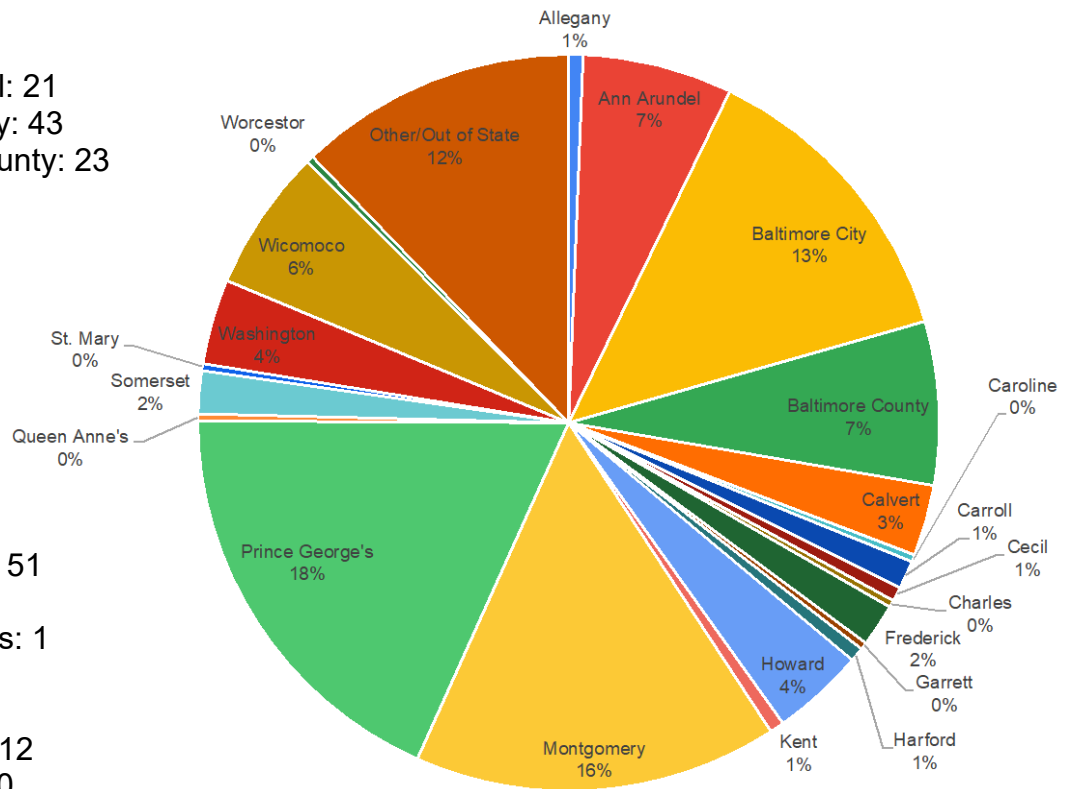
- *Greatest Challenge:* Social Attitudes and Social Issues

Registration Survey: Details

In all, 320 individuals from the Maryland's 22 of 24 counties registered for this event. Most came from the state's largest metro areas, however, there was also ample registration from Maryland's rural counties and the Eastern Shore. Those who took part represented a diverse array of job roles within the civic education sphere.

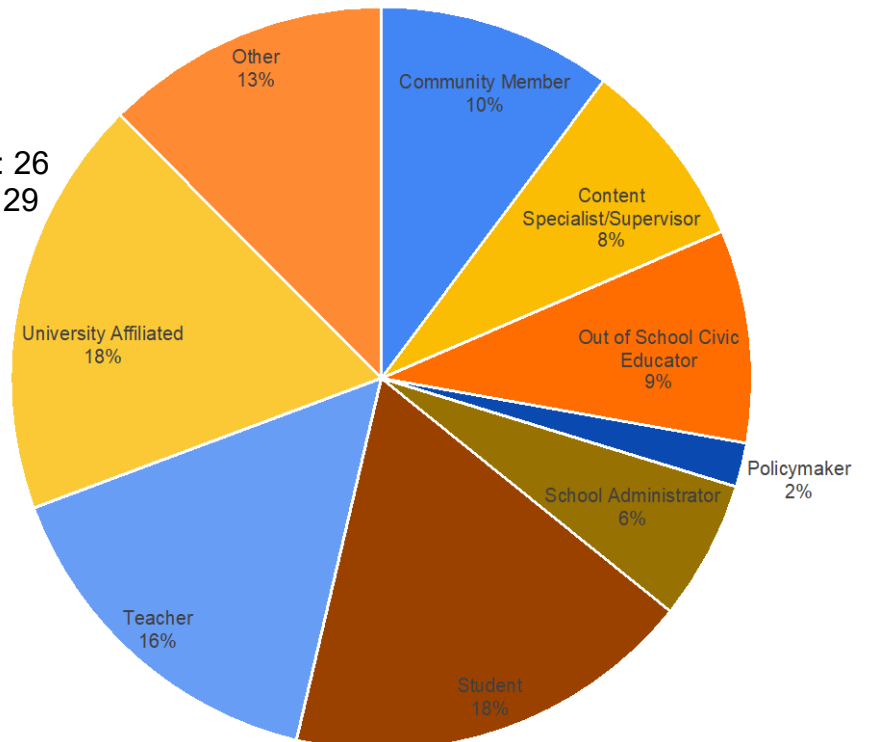
Attendees by County

Allegany: 2
 Anne Arundel: 21
 Baltimore City: 43
 Baltimore County: 23
 Calvert: 10
 Caroline: 1
 Carroll: 4
 Cecil: 2
 Charles: 1
 Frederick: 6
 Garrett: 1
 Harford: 2
 Howard: 13
 Kent: 2
 Montgomery: 51
 PG: 59
 Queen Anne's: 1
 Somerset: 6
 St Mary: 1
 Washington: 12
 Wicomoco: 20
 Worcester: 1
 Other/Out of State: 39



Attendees by Role

Community Member: 32
 Content Specialist/Supervisor: 26
 Out of School Civic Educator: 29
 Policymaker: 6
 School Administrator: 19
 Student: 56
 Teacher: 49
 University Affiliated: 67
 Other: 39



B. Roundtable 1: Civic Learning in Maryland Classrooms

The summit included four roundtable discussions, each devoted to a different civic education topic. This first session focused on what civic learning looks like within Maryland classrooms. Attendees discussed what they saw as challenges, and shared best practices, insights, and resources with one another.

Roundtable 1: Challenges

Within this conversation, there was considerable discussion around the challenges posed by the hesitancy of teachers to discuss controversial issues. This dovetailed with comments regarding the need for more professional development for teachers. Some attendees suggest that administrators and policymakers might consider providing training aimed at helping teachers broach controversial topics in the classroom. A summit participant explains below:

“More outreach to school administration needs to happen so they hear what people in classrooms care about and need.”

Additionally, attendees suggested that additional teacher training opportunities could be a component in the improvement of civic education policy in Maryland. Universities could take a leading role in preparing teachers to be better civic educators. Participants explain:

“I think we need training on how to teach controversial issues.”

“I don’t think that we have built in mechanisms for that training just yet, but there are courses out there. I took a civic online reasoning course and it was awesome...”

When asked which proven practice of civic learning has the greatest barriers, the conversation quickly turned to equity issues, as not all students have the same access to extracurricular activities (proven practice #4). Some said that ‘honors’ students might have more opportunities than the overall student population, with STEM subjects being typically favored more than social studies-style courses. Attendees asserted the need for a more equitable distribution of education resources to be spread across the state. A comment was made that districts with more disadvantaged students are prone to a decreased emphasis on social studies education in favor of STEM subjects.

Another common theme throughout the conference was that civic learning opportunities should be widely incorporated in all courses. Proven practice #1 calls for civic learning throughout the preK-12 curricula in order to help students understand how government works, why it works that way, and the challenges that exist within it.

Roundtable 1: Best Practices

Attendees in these breakout sessions were also asked which proven practice of civic learning seemed to be a strength statewide. A common response was that teachers seem to be doing a good job of relating happenings outside of the classroom to instruction inside the classroom (relates to proven practice #2). There was renewed discussion around the need to support teachers when they address controversial issues and how these discussions should be had with all students, not just those in the “honors” courses.

Roundtable 1: Insights

When asked what surprised them about civic learning in Maryland during breakout discussion sessions, attendees responded with multiple answers. A common comment was about civic learning for elementary and middle school students, yet this does not seem to be a uniform practice across the state. Adults were interested to hear from students about how they found the required service-learning hours to be rewarding. Another insight was how government courses are typically taught in 9th & 10th grade, several years before those students would be eligible to vote.

Teachers were asked about their personal experiences in teaching civic learning in the state. In history courses and others, some instructors are taking the opportunity to relate historical events with civic issues in a way that elevates marginalized perspectives to events that are not traditionally associated with those groups (i.e. minority experiences during the Great Depression). Teachers then can explain how history has impacted the everyday experiences of people in those groups.

Attendees spoke about the influence that teachers carry; they have the opportunity to mentor students and encourage them to join conversations around civic involvement. It was pointed out that some issues do not have middle ground, and in these cases teachers might not be able to have a neutral perspective. Some mentioned the teach-in’s of the 1960’s and wondered out-loud if such practices would be allowed today.

Roundtable 1: Resources

During the *Civic Learning in Maryland Classrooms* session, several resources were shared. Attendees pointed to outside organizations that are also doing the work of fostering civic education in youth (*Girl Scouts* was mentioned). Within the classroom, it was recommended that instructors foster a safe-space environment where students can experiment with sharing their views. Another suggestion was for all pre-service teachers to have taken government courses as part of their training (these are required for secondary education but not elementary).

C. Roundtable 2: Deliberating Current and Controversial Issues; A Solution to Political Polarization?

Roundtable 2: Challenges

During these breakout sessions, attendees were asked what they would need in order to have high-quality deliberative discussions in the classroom. The answers centered around a common theme: teachers need to learn how to address controversial issues, and in particular, how to have constructive conversations around race. It was suggested that an increased level of empathy might allow participants to better recognize and embrace their commonalities.

Roundtable 2: Best Practices

On the subject of what defines a “high-quality” deliberative discussion about controversial issues, the importance of ensuring that every student feels welcome to speak their voice and be heard was a noteworthy point. In order to have such discussions, however, instructors explained the importance of support from administrators. They ask for a culture that supports civic engagement; this could be achieved through foundational policy documents and recognition or awards. For the virtual instruction format, another idea was shared for facilitating high-quality discussions. The recommendation is having adults turn their Zoom cameras off and allowing the students to lead the discussion. Those who tried this method noted that students seemed much more productive: “once students get started, it’s hard to stop them.”

Roundtable 2: Insights

Resonating points from this session include that civic education is a team effort among all teachers, not just those who instruct social studies. All subjects can incorporate such practices as teaching students how to detect argument fallacies in an effort to help students hone their conversational skills.

One teacher holds weekly “community education seminars” where a controversial topic is chosen and participants can have an open conversation where they can speak without fear of judgement. This was also used in another district, called “Courageous Conversations.” The student participants want teachers to be fostering these types of discussions.

Such conversations encourage students to take their deliberation skills into adulthood in an effort to improve their community and government (particularly in the face of today’s challenges). Attendees were reminded that it’s one thing to talk about social issues, but another to bring about actual policy change.

Roundtable 2: Resources

[StreetLaw, Inc.](#) provides free resources that teachers can access and use.

When asked about potentially helpful resources, some suggested updated university curricula that provide future teachers the tools they need to have high-quality deliberative conversations.

D. Roundtable 3: Media Literacy in an Era of “Truth Decay”

Roundtable 3: Challenges

Attendees were asked which hurdles needed to be overcome to ensure that media literacy efforts are equitably available to youth in Maryland. Bias—both on the part of individuals and the media—was a common answer. To overcome bias, an emphasis should be placed on approaching media literacy only from a place of learning. Participants went on to note that parents do not often have the same media literacy skills that teachers seek to impress upon their students, so efforts must be made to engage the parents as well, bringing them along in the process. Lastly, it was mentioned that what teachers learned in school and during training is not always relevant today. Print media differs significantly from what young people are exposed to on the internet. A special effort must be made to catch teachers up.

Roundtable 3: Best Practices

When identifying strengths that already exist in schools that could be used to improve media literacy in students, attendees pointed out school publications that many students are already working on. Student newspapers provide youth a real-life opportunity to explore media bias and overcome such challenges. Many other resources like this already exist in schools (explored more below in the resources section).

Roundtable 3: Insights

The positive and negative aspects of internet media were discussed in detail during this session. On one hand, social media platforms (such as Twitter) often elevate the perspectives of experts and credible sources. If students are taught to identify these more legitimate voices, it provides an opportunity for greater learning and student engagement with real-life events. This notion highlights the importance of building *media endurance* in even the youngest learners in an effort to increase media literacy as students enter the adult world.

In *Redesigning Civic Education for the Digital Age*¹, the author provides a brief description of media endurance:

“...[In] addition to supporting students’ foundational digital literacies, he wanted them to build up the stamina needed to navigate this new landscape, and to take advantage of digital tools for civic purposes”

An important point was that media literacy needs to be present in all subjects—not just social studies and government classes. It was pointed out that there is a great opportunity in math courses to teach such skills; students could be called upon to analyze and interpret the data that is often portrayed in news media. Students could either corroborate the data and its portrayal as reputable or be trained to detect flaws and/or bias.

A final discussion in this section focused on the role schools play in shaping the media literacy of youth. Schools can be a form of media—they spread mass communication. It is important that teachers hold themselves to the same standards that they seek in the media. They must also encourage students to think for themselves.

Roundtable 3: Resources

It was discussed in depth how librarians are playing an important role in teaching media literacy. Particularly in elementary schools, librarians can help teachers cover the topic of media literacy in grades where less time is devoted to social studies. Librarians are often local experts on media literacy and can help train students to identify reputable sources, bias, and misleading information.

Students can also be a resource in the classroom; they often have the skills to navigate the various online (and social media) platforms. Teachers have the opportunity to figure out what their students are reading and call upon them to do the investigating into their sources of choice. Students can share information with each other, while the teacher takes on more of a mentorship role.

The [Civic Online Reasoning Institute](#) curriculum provides free lessons and assessments that help teachers teach pupils how to evaluate pertinent online information. Furthermore, public news sources, such as [PBS](#), the local news, and the [BBC](#) were mentioned as good resources from which to teach media literacy.

¹ Joseph Kahne, Erica Hodgins & Elyse Eidman-Aadahl (2016) *Redesigning Civic Education for the Digital Age: Participatory Politics and the Pursuit of Democratic Engagement, Theory & Research in Social Education*, 44:1, pp 16
,DOI: [10.1080/00933104.2015.1132646](https://doi.org/10.1080/00933104.2015.1132646)

E. Roundtable 4: Service-learning and Experiential Civic Learning; Rewards and Challenges in Providing Equitable Civic Engagement Opportunities

Roundtable 4: Challenges

In this session, participants were asked what barriers exist to meaningful, high-quality service-learning opportunities. The immediate issue of the pandemic was a common answer. Online learning has made it even more difficult to look outside the classroom and get students to engage with the community. One instructor states, “we get half as far in twice as long” teaching during the pandemic. A positive point, however, was that online learning has made it easier to bring community leaders into the virtual classroom, without having to wrangle permission slips and transportation.

The lack of time in the school day to instruct service-learning was also a big challenge for many teachers. Teachers explain that there is a lot of ground to cover in the social studies/history curriculum, so civics sometimes tend to fall by the wayside. Further complicating this is the fact that subjects are further siloed in high school, making time-saving teacher collaboration more difficult (though there is more room for collaboration in elementary and middle schools). Finally, conversations with outside organizations are often ad hoc and often require instructors to find these groups on their own. A formalized process would be time saving.

Time-related difficulties are also experienced by community leaders called upon to assist with civic education. Many of these people do not have the time or bandwidth to acquire the required background checks and fingerprinting that is needed to get into contact with the schools.

Political polarization was also seen as a challenge to civic and experiential learning. Some instructors are continually unsure of which topics are okay to be discussed, and which topics they should shy away from. In some cases, teachers are even unsure of what verbiage to use when navigating controversial issues. Furthermore, political polarization is also having an effect on students. One teacher explains:

“When youth are engaging in their communities, it is very easy to label them ‘political’ and ... partisan [on topics] that should not be partisan. How do we engage students in civic engagement with this in mind?”

Indeed, students are also struggling with a politically-polarized world. But the challenge of instructing civic learning is even greater in schools with less resources and fewer teacher professional development opportunities. Another instructor details:

“Service-learning for students who are low-income is extremely difficult, as they may not have the resources or time to conduct community service projects, so trying to find a way to connect them with those opportunities more easily is key.”

Such challenges call for more representation in community mentorship, as mentors do not always look like their mentees. Looking forward, ensuring that mentors and resources are continually extended into the long term is important so that students can continue to benefit from these programs. Finally, it was pointed out that students are often unable to find organizations on their own. School staff and counselors should continue creating a *menu* of opportunities for civic involvement, which would facilitate easier student engagement with their communities.

Roundtable 4: Best Practices

An idea that was also shared in this session is a partnership with civic organizations with missions that can add to the curriculum. These outside-the-classroom organizations are often conducting projects that align with what is being covered in class. Furthermore, these partnerships foster a greater willingness of students to become more involved in their communities. A roundtable moderator explains:

“Working so hard with community partners...that’s the thing that connects project based civic learning or experiential civic learning...to the community”

Teachers might also have the opportunity to look into exchange programs, as these can also increase civic learning.

Roundtable 4: Insights

Attendees were asked to identify points that resonated with them during the roundtable conference. Some shared that they were inspired by teachers who were able to connect service-learning with their own personal experience. Teachers who have volunteered before can be called upon to share their experience with their students. The practice of sharing civic-involvement experience can facilitate teacher-student mentorship. One instructor explains:

“[It] took me 20 hours to learn how to submit legislative testimony on the Maryland website as an adult. Now that I’ve got it, I can teach others the skill in 15 minutes. That skill acquisition and sharing reduces the barrier to entry, which is what can happen for students as well.”

Teachers can manage service-learning by teaching teamwork, responsibility and perseverance before letting students lead the effort. Students can generate their

own ideas for projects, rather than the ideas being handed down from their teachers. This practice fosters an enhanced commitment to their projects and projects a greater emphasis on the physical and emotional reward from participating in community service.

Roundtable 4: Resources

Teachers were asked what they would need in order to facilitate a high-quality civic-learning experience in their classrooms. There was a common call for ideas that help teachers integrate civics into other subjects, such as math and science, without letting the required curriculum fall by the wayside. Students who hear about civics in math and other subjects are more likely to absorb the material and be more engaged in class. Some pointed out the existing connections between art, English and history that pertain to service-learning and suggested that those overlaps should be explored in the classroom (someone asked about possibly using art to cover the Electoral College issue). Resources around discussing difficult topics, as well as “grab and go” lesson plans would help teachers in every subject bring civics into the classroom. Such would suit the goal of making civic learning a part of the larger educational culture, rather than an afterthought.

Greater access to quality mentors was also sought as a resource. These community leaders can help lead youth involvement, fostering greater collaboration between the school and the community. More mentors who give their time, effort and money to help students succeed are needed because students with good mentors can be inspired to enter the education field themselves later in their careers, becoming future changemakers.

Attendees also took the time in this session to share effective resources that they are already using:

- [Senior Leadership Montgomery & Leadership Greater Washington](#)
- [International Baccalaureate \(IB\) Curricula](#)
- [The Center for Civic Education’s Project Citizen Program](#)
- Higher Education Financial Management from [League of Women Voters](#)
- [Montgomery County Volunteer Center website](#)
- [League of Women Voters Baltimore City / DEI Project](#)
- [4H / AmeriCorps / Girl Scouts](#)