These are indeed exciting times in education. New standards, frameworks, resources and funding options abound, all targeted to prepare our students for college and career in the 21st century. But let’s not neglect the “third C” – citizenship education – as part of the mission of our schools.

The California Task Force on K-12 Civic Learning, led by California Chief Justice Tani G. Cantil-Sakauye, State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson and the Power of Democracy Steering Committee, is leading the charge to ensure all students acquire the knowledge, skills and dispositions to be responsible, actively engaged citizens. The task force report issued in 2014 lays out a number of policy recommendations to attain this goal.

There is hardly a teacher, school administrator, parent or policymaker who will deny that every one of our students needs to understand and embrace their role as future citizens to ensure that our American democracy is sustained, strengthened and valued. But attaining that goal is another story.

We are all familiar with the “professional development shotgun effect,” when only a few teachers from a school attend a workshop or conference. They often come back enthusiastic and begin implementing what they have learned. The students lucky to be in their classroom benefit greatly. But the many others who do not? Not so much.

At the Los Angeles County Office of Education, we have developed a program that institutionalizes high quality civic learning so that all students will graduate high school with the competencies to be informed, engaged citizens. Funded by the S.D. Bechtel Jr. Foundation with support from the Los Angeles County Education Foundation, the California Democracy School Civic Learning Initiative is a three-year project that engages 10 high schools in Los Angeles County and two high schools in Orange County. The goal is for all students in each of these schools to participate in a high quality civic inquiry and investigation at least once.

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By Michelle M. Herczog
once in their high school career.

As we conclude year three of the initiative, schools are adopting policies to integrate civic learning across entire grade spans. Many are integrating it into existing history and government classes, but some are integrating it onto English and science courses.

At Bellflower High School, Principal Michael Lundgren is working to integrate it into all history classes at all grade levels. At Glendale High School, Principal Monica Makiewicz is working with teachers to establish a Contemporary World Affairs course requirement for all ninth graders with an emphasis on civic learning. Principal Eva Mayoral at Santa Monica High School is instituting civic learning in the required freshman orientation class. Loara and Savanna High Schools in the Anaheim Union High School District and Workman High School in the Hacienda La Puente Unified School District are building it into 10th, 11th and 12th grade history and government courses. And the girls at the Scott Scudder Juvenile Camp are also benefiting from civic learning opportunities to address real world problems through investigation, research and informed action.

What is high quality civic learning?

Civic learning today is more than plowing through the government textbook, learning about the three branches of government and “how a bill becomes a law.” Of course it’s important to acquire knowledge of our American past and the role and responsibility of the government and its citizenry in a democratic society. But if we truly want students to become engaged citizens, we must provide them ample opportunities to develop and practice civic skills to learn, firsthand, how our democracy works so they can fully embrace their role as informed responsible citizens.

The Guardian of Democracy report published by the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools outlines six proven practices to achieve this goal:

• Classroom instruction in government, history, economics, law and democracy.
• Discussion of current events and controversial issues.
• Service-learning opportunities linked to formal curriculum and classroom instruction.
• Extracurricular activities.
• School governance that encourages student participation.
• Simulations of democratic processes.

The California Democracy School Initiative provides professional development, resources, coaching and technical assistance to guide teachers through a five step inquiry-driven process modeled after the College, Career and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards.

The process begins with a civic inquiry that frames a public problem or issue that is relevant to students and can lead to civic action. This leads to research and investigation led by students to identify multiple perspectives of the causes and implications of the identified issue.

From there, students engage in civil dialogue that reveals information, pro and con arguments and evidence to support a conclusion. The last step is to allow students to strengthen their “civic muscles” by taking informed civic action based on their deep analysis of the issue and the various implications of the public policy solution they propose.

This inquiry-based approach to instruction should sound familiar. Like the Common Core State Standards and Next Generation Science Standards, civic learning described this way focuses on the same pedagogical principles – inquiry-driven instruction that promotes deep learning, critical thinking and analysis of findings, the development of conclusions based on evidence leading ultimately to the application of acquired knowledge and information in the real world to solve real world problems.

It’s not rocket science

We don’t claim to invent this approach to implementing schoolwide civic learning but draw on a number of proven practices and implementation paradigms.

• The Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools drives the mission of this work. Led by Executive Director Ted McConnell, the campaign works with 60-plus coalition partners and a steering committee to bring about changes in state, local and national policy to promote civic learning and implement the recommendations in the report “Guardian of Democracy: The Civic Mission of Schools.”

• The Illinois Democracy Schools, an initiative of the Illinois Civic Mission Coalition and the Robert R. McCormick Foundation, led by Shawn Healy, also guides our work. The Illinois project recognizes and supports high schools that are dedicated to expanding and improving civic learning experiences across the curriculum.

• The Leadership Planning Guide California, Common Core State Standards and Assessments Implementation, published by the California County Superintendents Educational Services Association in 2013.
identifies 10 key components and carefully outlines four phases to achieve effective implementation: Awareness Phase, Transition Phase, Implementation Phase, and Continuous Improvement Phase.

The Partnership for 21st Century Learning promotes a systems approach to achieve their mission “to serve as catalyst for 21st century learning” and offers the Mile Guide Self-Assessment tool with benchmarks and goals for teachers, administrators and policymakers to identify current progress and formulate next steps.

We know what works

Based on proven implementation practices, we focused on the following key elements to build and sustain the program at each of the 12 high schools. Findings from our Year Two Evaluation Report conducted by Tiffany Berry and Sarah Mason from Claremont Graduate University provided further rationale for our approach.

1. Leadership is key. In order to be considered for the program, schools needed to complete an application that demonstrated support for institutionalizing civic learning across entire grade spans within three years. Signatures from the school principal, district superintendent and school board president were required. Each school designated a “civic learning team” of classroom teachers, a site administrator and parent/family representative to be led by a designated civic learning coordinator.

School site and district administrators are expected to provide time and space for the team to collaborate as professional development communities at least once a month and for teachers to participate in professional development provided by the Initiative. School leaders support the development and alignment of curriculum to integrate civic inquiry and investigation practices across a grade span of their choice and are proposing policy changes to institutionalize and sustain the curriculum beyond the scope of the project.

Civic learning coordinators meet regularly with principals and act as liaisons to the California Democracy School staff. School leaders participate in Leadership Meetings held twice a year to share their successes and challenges with administrators from other schools and districts.

The California Democracy School Planning Guide is instrumental in guiding their work. It outlines seven steps to achieving optimal outcomes for attaining student civic competencies, educational support systems, and the school environment for full implementation:

- Form a team dedicated to the California Democracy School mission and vision.
- Assess your current reality.
- Develop an action plan.
- Implement your plan.
- Analyze results.
- Revise your plan as needed.
- Communicate progress and celebrate.

The Year Two Evaluation report found that “if teachers are to adopt new civic learning practices they must first 1) hold positive attitudes toward teaching civic learning, 2)
work in an environment where the use of civic learning practices is both encouraged and expected, and 3) believe they have the skills, resources and time to do so." Leadership is key to attaining this goal.

2. High Quality Professional Development. During the first year of the program, the school civic learning teams participated in professional development to learn how to implement civic inquiry and investigations in classrooms.

Professional experts from across the country, including Joseph Kahne from Mills College, Diana Hess, currently the dean of the School of Education at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, Mary Ellen Daneels, teacher leader of the Illinois Democracy School initiative and others, guided teachers in the art of framing civic inquiries, leading students through deep investigations, facilitating civil dialogue about controversial issues and helping students take informed action by reaching out to civic leaders and policymakers to solve real world problems.

As teachers moved through the awareness and transition phases in year one, they practiced what they learned and made adjustments in their classrooms. In year two, other teachers were brought on board, and a plan to implement civic learning across grade spans began to emerge. Teachers new to the program were provided professional development, coaching, and technical support to bring them up to speed. The Initiative continues to provide face-to-face training for the 12 schools in the form of a three-day symposium that is also available to outside schools. A series of online professional development modules will soon be released and available at no cost.

3. Civic Learning Coach. The Initiative employs a full-time civic learning coach that has been proven to be instrumental to the success of the program. His role is to visit each of the 12 schools on a regular basis to provide individual coaching and technical assistance to teachers and facilitate monthly professional learning community meetings.

In the Year Two Evaluation, "teachers described the coach as 'extremely supportive and always there to answer questions'; 'pivotal to the implementation of civic education in our classrooms'; and 'an extremely valuable asset.' 'He was really good at giving us direction, especially when there were upcoming events. And he's also been really helpful in giving us feedback – he'll come and watch us in our classroom. Saying, 'you guys are on track; or have you ever thought about doing this?'"

4. Professional Learning Communities. School teams meet monthly as professional learning communities to reflect on acquired learning from professional development opportunities, engage in dialogue about classroom practices, and make decisions about building capacity and support. Teams are also provided planning time, mini-grants, and tools to adopt resources to support their individual school initiatives.

Our most successful schools attribute their work as professional learning communities when they receive:

• managerial support, such as motivation or encouragement from school leaders or administrators;
• financial or material support, such as resources, space, materials or computers; or
• time away from other work to focus on PLC-related activities.

Much of the heavy lifting comes from the work of these professional learning communities. Action plans are developed and carried out, new curriculum is written, presentations to school boards are created and collaboration is strengthened. As a result, the PLC members reported highly positive work environments and positive working relationships with other PLC members.

When students feel engaged, when they feel heard, when they feel there is a purpose and reason for learning, the school climate is improved and academic learning can blossom.

Realizing success

As we approach the end of this three-year initiative, we are excited to see the progress and accomplishments achieved. Schools are implementing plans to institutionalize civic learning across entire grade spans and moving above and beyond by:

• offering additional professional development opportunities for teachers across their school and district;
• developing and sharing civic learning resources, including lesson plans at schoolwide staff meetings;
• establishing democratic processes in student-led school government and town hall meetings;
• changing curriculum, such as re-writing the curriculum for the freshman seminar or making civic learning activities a part of the school’s graduation requirements; and
• initiating civic learning events such as civics fairs or civics-related scholarship funds to support students in their efforts to work toward solving issues they care about.

Years two and three culminate with a California Showcase Event that features the accomplishments of the 12 schools. This student-led event held at the Richard Nixon Presidential Library in 2015 and this year at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library features the work of students, teachers, administrators, school board members and community members working together to

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showcase what young people can do to realize the promise of our democracy.

Overall, teachers in the initiative have reacted with enthusiasm when they see the results in students:

• “Seeing kids actually engage in issues that exist in our society today that even adults grapple with trying to resolve is really rewarding. And seeing them have articulate opinions based on the evidence they’ve uncovered.”

• “I think it’s the fact that the teacher doesn’t control this – teachers are quiet. They’re facilitating. And so I think it’s the fact that students are being heard.”

And when it comes to student attitudes and dispositions, we hear young people say:

• “I feel great about ‘taking action’ in my school because I want to make a difference/change. Everyone complains at school about many things, I want to change that. Last year I didn’t like helping as much.”

• “I felt like I couldn’t change anything before, to let things pass me by, but now I feel as if I need to.”

• “I believe taking action in my school or community is very important. There are certain issues that go unheard of and need to be addressed. I definitely feel different from a year ago because serving my community opened my eyes.”

When students feel engaged, when they feel heard, when they feel there is a purpose and reason for learning, the school climate is improved and academic learning can blossom. By engaging all students in high quality civic learning we know the future of our nation will be secure because the next generation of citizens will be informed, actively engaged, responsible, and capable of carrying out the principles upon which our American democracy was founded.

Resources


• Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools: www.civicmissionofschools.org.

• Power of Democracy Steering Committee: powerofdemocracy.org.


• Partnership for 21st Century Learning: p21.org

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