



Breaking New Ground with California's State Seal of Civic Engagement

Lessons from Year 1



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About LEADE

Housed at UCLA and UC Riverside, the Leveraging Equity and Access in Democratic Education (LEADE) initiative works to ensure students have access to high quality civic learning opportunities. LEADE partners with key stakeholders to identify civic learning priorities, develop tools to collect data on equity and access, contribute to public deliberation and strategic planning, support professional development efforts, and aid in district reform efforts that promote democratic education.

<https://centerx.gseis.ucla.edu/leade/>

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Introduction

“*The future of our democracy depends on a knowledgeable and actively engaged citizenry,*” said **State Board President Linda Darling-Hammond**. “*With this new seal, we hope to prepare all students with an empathetic concern for others, a deep understanding of democracy, and the civic engagement skills needed to contribute to the welfare of their local communities, the state, and the country.*”

“*We know that when young people activate their voices, they can be among the strongest change agents in our communities,*” said **State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Thurmond**. “*Education is the cornerstone of realizing our democratic ideals, and this new seal puts additional tools in students’ hands as they work to shape the future.*”

—California Department of Education press release, September 10th, 2020¹

The California State Seal of Civic Engagement

At a time of great concern about the health of our democracy, California has taken a significant step to recognize the importance of civic and democratic education. On September 10th, 2020, the California State Board of Education unanimously approved the State Seal of Civic Engagement (SSCE), an initiative awarding students who have demonstrated excellence in civics with a seal on their diploma. California is one of five states that now offers such a diploma seal in recognition of students’ civic learning and/or civic engagement; the other states include Arizona, Georgia, New York, and Virginia. The SSCE represents a unique opportunity to galvanize attention and support for civic education in California and to set a leading example for the rest of the country.

The California Department of Education has provided criteria, guidance, and civic learning resources to support local education agencies (LEAs) in determining how to implement the SSCE in their local contexts and to ensure that the SSCE is accessible and inclusive to all students. For more information about the SSCE, visit www.cde.ca.gov/pd/ca/hs/hssstateseal.asp.





In order to earn the SSCE, students must:

1. Be engaged in academic work in a productive way;
2. Demonstrate a competent understanding of U.S. and California constitutions; functions and governance of local governments; tribal government structures and organizations; the role of the citizen in a constitutional democracy; and democratic principles, concepts, and processes;
3. Participate in one or more informed civic engagement project(s) that address real-world problems and require students to identify and inquire into civic needs or problems, consider varied responses, take action, and reflect on efforts;
4. Demonstrate civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions through self-reflection; and
5. Exhibit character traits that reflect civic-mindedness and a commitment to positively impact the classroom, school, community and/or society.

Students across the state have expressed overwhelming support for the SSCE. For example, as described in the section titled "Students' Perspectives Of and Experiences With the SSCE," a student-led organization called Generation Up (GENup) mobilized youth from across the state to urge the California State Board of Education to approve the SSCE by submitting nearly 50 written public comments, producing a video, and encouraging several of the student participants to speak during the board meeting for the verbal public comment period. Students in local chapters have also been at the forefront of advocating for their districts and schools to adopt the SSCE.

In addition, the SSCE has broad support from a variety of stakeholders. For example, the Authentic Preparation Today (APT) working group, whose members include a diverse statewide coalition of approximately 40 education thought leaders, advocated for the SSCE and developed a roadmap outlining four guiding principles for integrating civic learning.² Youth-serving community-based organizations (CBOs) are also in a strong position to expand civic learning in the context of the SSCE. In October 2019, members and leaders of more than a dozen leading CBOs joined representatives of civic education organizations at a statewide meeting to discuss the SSCE's potential to advance civic education and youth civic engagement throughout California.

The Rationale and Research Behind Civic Learning

Civic learning is a process through which young people develop the knowledge, skills, and commitments to interact effectively with fellow community members to address shared problems. It includes preparation for practices seeking to promote the public good through nongovernmental organizations and informal community work and political engagement, as well as activities aiming to influence state action through formal avenues such as voting, lobbying, petitioning, or protesting.³

A range of research has demonstrated the benefits of civic learning opportunities.⁴ A variety of civic learning opportunities, delivered both in and out of school, can foster greater and more informed civic and political engagement.⁵ These opportunities include lessons on the principles of American democracy, class discussions of relevant social issues, extracurricular activities that promote community service, school governance structures that engage youth as equal participants, and youth CBOs

focused on social change. Evidence has shown that civic education raises young people's knowledge, skills, and dispositions and supports them in becoming active citizens as adults.⁶ For instance, teaching young people explicitly about politics and elections is related to higher levels of political knowledge, and high school students who discuss underlying social and political problems in conjunction with service projects in turn become more civically engaged.⁷

However, many students are not receiving the civic education necessary to support informed and active participation in civic and political life.⁸ This inadequate provision of civic learning opportunities is especially common in schools serving low-income communities, communities of color, and immigrant communities.⁹ Nationally, White students, middle-income students, and students in higher-track classes experience more classroom-based, after-school, and informal civic learning opportunities, and they are much more likely to be engaged in extracurricular activities that support civic development.¹⁰ A study of more than 2,300 high school students in California



found that Black and Latinx students were less likely than White students to report exposure to civic learning opportunities such as current event discussions, civic simulations, and an open classroom climate.¹¹

Similarly, when Rogers and Terriquez conducted a California statewide survey in 2014, they found that high school students attending elite private schools and public school students from middle-income families were more likely than their peers to participate in extracurricular clubs or groups aimed at making a difference in their schools, communities, or society as a whole.¹² Relatedly, civic learning outcomes (as demonstrated on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) civics assessment) are low and unequal. In 2018, only 24% of all eighth graders scored at or above the proficient level on the most recent civics assessment, and the proportion of Black and Latinx students achieving proficiency is lower still.¹³

What We Know About Civic Learning in California

Until recently, civic education received little attention in California educational policy and was inadequately supported in districts and schools across the state. In 2014, the California Task Force on K-12 Civic Learning, commissioned by State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson and California Supreme Court Chief Justice Tani Cantil-Sakauye, issued a report titled "Revitalizing K-12 Civic Learning in California: A Blueprint for Action."¹⁴ The task force urged the state to create a new approach to civic education, and not to rely only on the 12th-grade government course, which comes late in a student's educational career and often emphasizes fact-based learning over participatory skills. They recommended that California do the following:

- Embed civic learning in core K–12 systems, including standards, assessments, and accountability mechanisms, as well as recognition and rewards for progress;
- Improve professional learning experiences for teachers and administrators and help them implement civic learning in schools by providing access to existing professional learning experiences in civics;
- Ensure that teachers have the curriculum and instructional supports they need to teach civics well;
- Work with community stakeholders and families to promote civic learning in and out of schools; and
- Ensure that civic learning is adequately funded in every district in California, via structures such as the Local Control Accountability Plans.¹⁵

Source: "Revitalizing K-12 Civic Learning in California: A Blueprint for Action" by the California Task Force on K-12 Civic Learning

Soon after, in 2016, the state adopted a new History Social Science (HSS) Framework¹⁶ that included attention to civic learning from kindergarten through Grade 12. In particular, Appendix E of the HSS Framework focuses in more detail on why civic learning is important, how it can be integrated into the HSS curriculum, and effective teaching and assessment strategies. Through training and support from the Content, Literacy, Inquiry and Citizenship (CLIC) Project,¹⁷ educators across the state have been guided to focus on inquiry-based instruction through innovative teaching and learning practices, as well as to promote civic knowledge, skills, and capacities in HSS courses.

The inclusion of civics in California's HSS framework has clearly paved the way for increased civic learning in schools throughout the state. However, the Leveraging Equity and Access in Democratic Education (LEADE) Initiative assessed the degree to which California school districts are focused on and devote resources to civic priorities, and found that attention to civic learning is still lacking. During the first half of 2020, LEADE surveyed and interviewed district officials, examined local control accountability plans (LCAPs), and analyzed a representative sample of mission statements from district websites, to find the following:

1. Civic and democratic goals are marginal to districts' mission statements.

More than five million of California's six million students attend schools in districts that do not articulate a substantial focus on civic education.

2. Civic and democratic commitments are absent from districts' LCAPs.

Only 13% of all districts in the state referenced civic(s), citizen(s), citizenship, or democracy in their LCAP. Fewer still specifically mention civics when discussing learning goals or specified investments for civic education.

3. Little staffing and infrastructure exists to support this civic agenda.

Only 29% of districts had a staff member dedicated to history and social sciences, and no districts employed more than one person in this area. According to district websites, schools employed more than twice the staffing for each of the other major disciplines of math, English/language arts, and science.¹⁸

When asked about the SSCE, a majority of the HSS county and district leads surveyed and interviewed by LEADE agreed that the SSCE will help to promote the importance of civic learning in their schools. However, district leaders also expressed concern about a lack of support to implement the SSCE in a high-quality and equitable manner. One district leader emphasized how important it will be to ensure that the SSCE,

doesn't turn into just another way for students who are already set up and geared to be successful—in terms of graduation and college and career readiness—to get accolades while those that are potentially struggling academically but may show some promise in the civic engagement arena might not have that same recognition.

Moreover, relatively few of those interviewed believed that the students in their districts are being exposed to a wide variety of civic learning opportunities that will enable them to earn the SSCE upon graduation.

When asked about the kinds of supports or resources to ensure an effective, high-quality, and equitable roll out of the SSCE, as was intended by the legislation, respondents indicated a critical need for professional development, collaboration and planning time for teachers, models and resources, funding, and staff time allocated at the district and school level for this work. And while civic learning often finds a central home in HSS, it will be important for educators in a range of content areas to support and integrate civic learning. Civic learning and the SSCE can help to create opportunities for students to learn about societal issues through the lens of a range of disciplines, as well as make real world applications in English/language arts, science, math, world languages, the arts, and so on.

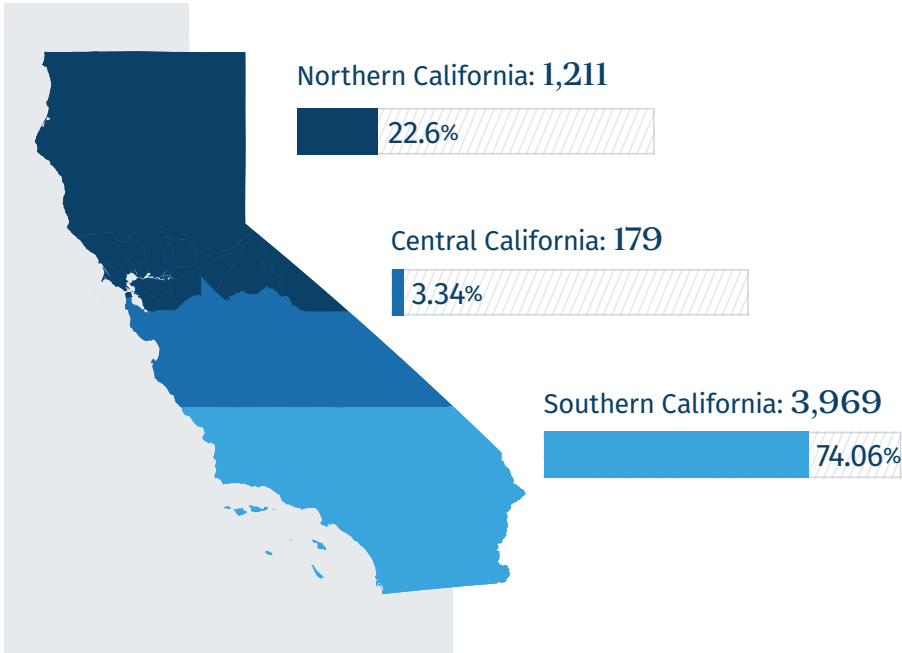
The State Seal of Civic Engagement: Year 1

The first year of implementation of the SSCE, the 2020–2021 school year, coincided with the COVID-19 global pandemic. As a result, California students spent a majority of that year engaged in remote or hybrid learning of some kind. Despite the sizable constraints that come with such a disruption, a total of 5,359 SSCE insignias were awarded to students in the spring of 2021. At the same time, as the graduating class of 2021 likely comprised just over 400,000 students (as consistent with the two preceding years¹⁹), only a little more than 1% of graduates is estimated to have earned the SSCE.

Of the SSCE insignias requested, 89.5% were conferred on diplomas, 0.11% on General Education Development Certificates, 0.13% on Certificates of Completion, and 10.3% on transcripts. A majority of the insignias (74.06%) were requested by LEAs in Southern California; LEAs in Northern California requested 22.60%, and 3.34% went to LEAs in Central California (Figure 1).²⁰ Given the myriad of challenges that occurred during the 2020–2021 school year, many LEAs chose to focus on critical planning and preparation to roll out the SSCE in the following year. Hopefully, as more stakeholders learn about the SSCE and its potential for increasing students’ access to high-quality civic learning, more LEAs throughout the state will adopt the SSCE and offer it to students earning a range of diplomas and certificates.

Unfortunately, no additional data are currently available at the state level to provide us with insights about the demographics of students who earned the SSCE in 2021 or the extent to which the SSCE was awarded equitably across the state. We hope that, in coming years, such data will be provided. In the meantime, however, LEAs can track this information at the local level. Such evidence can reveal to LEAs their own progress in making the SSCE inclusive and accessible to all students, and can help them to assess and adjust their goals as well as inform the steps they take in implementing this initiative.

Figure 1. SSCE Insignias Awarded to Students in 2021, By Region



Our Methods for This Study

For this study, we focused on LEAs whose efforts incorporate three core aims that we believe are crucial for the SSCE to reach its full potential in the state. First, these LEAs planned their SSCE implementations with access and equity in mind. Second, they viewed the SSCE as a tool to raise the profile of civic learning more broadly in their community: Their aims for the SSCE were connected to a broader and systemic vision of preparing all students to participate in the community, in society, and in democracy. Third, these LEAs included a range of stakeholders, partners, and voices in the implementation process in order to foster a participatory and democratic environment for deliberation and development of the initiative. As the LEAs we examined encountered a variety of bumps in the road, none of the portraits we provide are meant to be prescriptive examples but rather models from which to draw upon and learn. Using takeaways from the lessons learned by the LEAs in this report, we also highlight several key considerations for educators and policymakers to ensure that the SSCE helps integrate civic learning in a substantive way in the state.

Over the course of the 2020–2021 school year, we interviewed five leaders working in county offices of education; eight leaders, either from a district office, in an alternative education program, or at a school site, who were assisting their LEA in rolling out the SSCE; and two school site administrators, five teachers, four community members, and 10 students. These participants were selected from across various regions of the state, including Northern, Central, and Southern California, as well as urban, suburban, and rural areas, in order to allow us to understand how the SSCE is being implemented in different geographical and community contexts.

There were some clear limitations to our study, as our observations drew on the early phase of implementation of the SSCE and occurred during a very difficult time as schools and communities faced a range of challenges associated with COVID-19. Our study is also not a comprehensive look at all efforts across the state. Nevertheless, the lessons learned from this early phase of implementation can help to inform other LEAs who have not yet adopted the SSCE and are curious about how to get started.

A Roadmap of This Report

We first focus on the experiences of 10 students who either earned the SSCE or were involved in advocating or preparing for the adoption of the SSCE. These students' experiences help to illuminate both how valuable civic learning and engagement are to youth in California and the ways in which adults can better cultivate informed and meaningful participation in democracy.

Next, we lift up a number of innovative and thoughtful efforts, at the local and the county level and in various regions of the state, during the first year of implementation of the SSCE. We describe the efforts, the lessons, and the challenges that seven LEAs²¹ faced in this first year, whether they offered the SSCE to students or focused solely on planning and preparation. The portraits of these LEAs draw on the perspectives and experiences of district leaders, teachers, site administrators, students, parents, and community members involved in adopting the SSCE, identifying valued civic learning goals, and devising ways to embed high-quality equitable civic learning for students in their communities.

In addition to illustrating work performed at the local level, we also summarize efforts at the county and regional levels that unfolded as leaders from county offices of education supported the rollout of the SSCE and helped to build educators' capacity to integrate civic learning. Finally, drawing on students' experiences and district- and county-level efforts, we outline three core themes that arose from the data that together form a set of recommendations underscoring the importance of student voice, equity and access, as well as building a infrastructure of support.

²¹ This report highlights the efforts of seven early adopters or local education agencies. However, two of the early adopters are described together in one portrait focusing on the Shasta region of the state. Thus, there are six portraits in the report covering the work of seven early adopters.

Report Roadmap

Students' Perspectives Of and Experiences With the SSCE

10

Describes the role of student advocacy and leadership at the state, district, and school levels as well as the experiences of students who earned the SSCE in 2020-2021

Anaheim Union High School District

19

Built off of the California Democracy School Initiative that integrates inquiry-to-action projects into the curriculum

Fresno Unified School District

24

Used existing pathways in service learning, social emotional learning, and career technical education for civic action projects

Orange County Department of Education

29

Created a new SSCE curriculum accessible to students in alternative, community, and correctional education settings

Riverside Unified School District

33

Convened school site teams to align the SSCE with RUSD's graduation standards and district-wide civic learning plan

Salinas Union High School District

38

Established a stakeholder committee including students, community members, teachers, and more to develop a district-wide civic learning plan

The Shasta Region

45

Engaged districts and schools in the rural region in a professional learning network to plan and launch the implementation of the SSCE

County and Regional Work Promoting the SSCE

53

Details how five county and regional offices of education facilitated interdisciplinary professional development and provided space for educators to receive feedback on the development of their SSCE local criteria

Themes and Recommendations

59

Draws on the experiences of the seven early adopters to outline recommendations and guiding questions for educators that relate to three broad categories: (1) student voice, (2) equity and accessibility, and (3) infrastructure

Endnotes:

- ¹ <https://www.cde.ca.gov/nr/ne/yr20/yr20rel76.asp>
- ² See <https://www.civicseal.org/about-us/mission-purpose-guiding-principles>.
- ³ <https://centerx.gseis.ucla.edu/leade/publications/reclaiming-the-democratic-purpose-of-californias-public-schools/>
- ⁴ Campbell, D. E. (2019). What social scientists have learned about civic education: A review of the literature. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 94(1), 32–47. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2019.1553601>; Gould, J., Jamieson, K. H., Levine, P., McConnell, T., & Smith, D. B. (Eds.) (2011). *Guardian of democracy: The civic mission of schools*. University of Pennsylvania, Lenore Annenberg Institute for Civics of the Annenberg Public Policy Center. <https://www.carnegie.org/publications/guardian-of-democracy-the-civic-mission-of-schools/>
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- ⁶ Levine, P., & Kawashima-Ginsberg, K. (2017). *The Republic is (still) at risk—and civics is part of the solution*. Tufts University, Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life. <https://tischcollege.tufts.edu/research/republic-still-risk-and-civics-part-solution>
- ⁷ Commission on Youth Voting and Civic Knowledge. (2013). *All together now: Collaboration and innovation for youth engagement: The report of the Commission on Youth Voting and Civic Knowledge*. Tufts University, Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life, Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement. <https://circle.tufts.edu/our-research/broadening-youth-voting/commission-youth-voting-and-civic-knowledge>
- ⁸ Gould et al., 2011
- ⁹ Kahne, J., & Middaugh, E. (2008). *Democracy for some: The civic opportunity gap in high school* (CIRCLE Working Paper 59). Tufts University, Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life., Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement. https://circle.tufts.edu/sites/default/files/2019-12/WP59_TheCivicOpportunityGapinHighSchool_2008.pdf
- ¹⁰ Kawashima-Ginsberg, K. (2013). *Do discussion, debate, and simulations boost NAEP civics performance?* (Fact Sheet). Tufts University, Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life, Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement. https://circle.tufts.edu/sites/default/files/2020-01/discussion_debate_naep_2013.pdf; Kahne & Middaugh, 2008
- ¹¹ Kahne & Middaugh, 2008
- ¹² Rogers, J., & Terriquez, V. (2017). *After-school civic learning opportunities for California youth*. University of California, Los Angeles, Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access.
- ¹³ National Center for Education Statistics. *National Assessment of Educational Progress civics assessment* (various years, 1998–2018). US Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/civics/>
- ¹⁴ <https://www.cde.ca.gov/eo/in/documents/cltffinalreport.pdf>
- ¹⁵ <https://www.cde.ca.gov/eo/in/documents/cltffinalreport.pdf>
- ¹⁶ <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/hs/cf/hssframework.asp>
- ¹⁷ <https://californiahss.org/index.html>
- ¹⁸ <https://centerx.gseis.ucla.edu/leade/publications/reclaiming-the-democratic-purpose-of-californias-public-schools/>
- ¹⁹ <https://www.cde.ca.gov/nr/ne/yr20/yr20rel101.asp>
- ²⁰ <https://www.cde.ca.gov/pd/ca/hs/documents/sscedata2020-21.xlsx>
- ²¹ This report highlights the efforts of seven early adopters or local education agencies. However, two of the early adopters are described together in one portrait focusing on the Shasta region of the state. Thus, there are six portraits in the report covering the work of seven early adopters.

Students' Perspectives Of and Experiences With the SSCE

“Civic learning doesn't have to exist in a silo. Hopefully, it's something that can be incorporated in every class, not just in a specific civics class or a government class ... If it's possible to inculcate in educators and in students that civic learning deserves to be as much of a readiness priority as college and career, then I think that's what's going to make civic learning something that's entrenched in California education.” —GENup Student Leader



The Importance of Student Voice

Young people deserve to have a voice in their own education. While at face value this concept seems beyond dispute, current practices in schools routinely ignore or neglect student voice, particularly for students of color.²² Responsiveness to student voice, however, has the potential to foster democratic values and commitments by reflecting students' goals and priorities. It is for this reason that we begin our report summarizing student perspectives of and experiences with the State Seal of Civic Engagement (SSCE). From the beginning, students have played a critical role in the adoption and implementation of the SSCE at the state, district, and school levels. And we believe they should remain core contributors to rollout efforts because centering student voice models the kind of high-quality democratic practices that the SSCE aims to promote in the first place.

Indeed, the SSCE creates numerous opportunities for schools to empower student voices. Students who participate in local advisory and stakeholder committees are afforded the chance to assume leadership roles in their districts and schools by shaping SSCE criteria and programming, while students working to attain the SSCE are provided with



“Put students first. That's always super, super important ... If students feel like they're the priority, a lot of good can come from that.”

opportunities to get involved with issues that matter to them and to make an authentic impact in their communities. As one student shared, such elevation can bring about many positive consequences:

Put students first. That's always super, super important ... If students feel like they're the priority, a lot of good can come from that. We can come together in a really meaningful way. I think [the SSCE] is pushing us to be better, as a community and as a California society. If we let it run its course, really great things can come with that.

In the sections that follow, we describe some of the pivotal ways in which students contributed to the development of the SSCE, as well as their reflections on earning the SSCE in its first year of existence.



State Advocacy

When student leaders at Generation Up (GENup), an education advocacy organization with local chapters in school districts across the nation, learned about California's efforts to pass the SSCE, they immediately recognized the need to incorporate student voice and the value that it could bring to the process. As a student-led organization, all of GENup's operations, campaigns, and local chapters are run by high school students, with their executive team focusing on statewide initiatives (e.g., supporting bills on mental health and ethnic studies) and local chapters pursuing their own campaigns around issues specific to their communities (e.g., developing a student bill of rights or advocating for more diverse literature in libraries). As such, GENup was uniquely equipped to generate student interest and mobilization around the SSCE and to provide input on the initiative's proposed criteria.

To start, members of GENup's executive team joined the statewide work group Authentic Preparation Today (APT, formerly PACCCRAS) to support the passage of the SSCE by the State Board of Education. After its approval in September 2020, GENup began leading presentations for student board members from school districts across the state to create awareness of the SSCE and to provide student leaders with tools (e.g., presentation slides and sample resolutions) to push their local superintendents and board presidents to adopt the program. Additionally, to help further spread awareness, GENup developed and distributed a video of student leaders in California explaining why they support the SSCE, and they held a meeting to support approximately 30 local chapters actively promoting SSCE adoption in their school districts. As more school districts learn about the SSCE and develop their own rollout campaigns, GENup will continue to provide support to student leaders.

Finally, GENup issued a Civic Engagement Pledge asking for school districts' commitment to adopting the SSCE as well as supporting student decision-making on governing boards and advisory bodies, increasing instruction on voting and elections, and integrating media literacy instruction into existing curriculum. In this way, GENup hopes to expand authentic student leadership opportunities and promote civic learning opportunities that are specifically tied to local and federal issues.



District-Level Planning Experience

In a handful of school districts, student leaders were given the chance to serve on district-wide advisory committees tasked with thinking about how to implement the SSCE. In Salinas Union High School District (SUHSD), for example, district leaders recruited five representatives through student organizations, such as the Junior State of America and La Cosecha, that have demonstrated a commitment to empowering youth in the community. Although some students found participating in the advisory committees to be intimidating, district leaders were able to meaningfully include them in

the process by elevating their voices, providing time and space for them to collaborate in breakout sessions, giving context to district policies and procedures, and encouraging them to conduct their own research before a meeting. In the end, these practices also benefited the adults on the advisory committee by modeling an effective embrace of student voices in what has traditionally been an adult space.

Of course, student leaders did not always agree with the other members of the advisory committees. For instance, a number of student leaders noted that some district representatives appeared overly concerned with portraying their district as “already progressive or already implementing the things students want to see,” rather than being open to criticism:

There’s a lot of opportunity to make change within the school district, but it seems they’re not open or willing to make that change. And I think that’s where a lot of civic engagement could happen, especially because the school district is one of the first [government] structures that students are exposed to and that affects their lives deeply.

This concern was echoed by students who had earned the SSCE in 2021 and felt that civic engagement projects that questioned current district practices were only superficially celebrated, presumably because the district was unprepared—or unwilling—to make the changes requested by students.

Student leaders were also concerned with making sure the SSCE was accessible to everyone—in particular, taking issue with proposed eligibility requirements that were based on grade point average (GPA), standardized test scores, and class track. One student leader recognized the SSCE as a way to engage students who are struggling academically, but felt that tying eligibility to specific indicators such as GPA meant that these same students would have “less access” to the SSCE, arguing that “these barriers were unnecessary in terms of civic engagement” and therefore counterintuitive to the mission of the SSCE. Relatedly, student leaders brought up issues surrounding the application process because they did not want the SSCE to feel like an “insurmountable goal to achieve,” and they worried that overly rigorous district criteria would disadvantage students from less affluent schools and students with greater family responsibilities. As a result, student leaders encouraged the advisory committee to find a balance that would work for individuals with a variety of circumstances and across diverse populations.

While student leaders expressed gratitude that the SSCE is a way to recognize the work of their peers and help them to build stronger resumes and college applications, they were more excited about its potential to empower students and benefit the local community. As one student leader explained, the SSCE is an incentive for students to “get out into the community, learn about the issues, and play some role in addressing those issues,” allowing them to better understand their role in the community and their ability to bring about meaningful change.



the SSCE is an incentive for students to “get out into the community, learn about the issues, and play some role in addressing those issues”



School-Level Planning Experience

At the local level, some school sites made a concerted effort to include students on their stakeholder committees to help shape requirements for the SSCE. For example, two students from a high school in Riverside Unified School District (RUSD) worked with teacher leaders to outline SSCE requirements moving forward:

We'll incorporate all of the teachers as mentors leading up to junior year ... In freshman year, they'll just start brainstorming and keeping a portfolio of civic projects or just topics, and collecting interviews and research. And that's what they'll be doing for freshman year and sophomore year. And then junior year is when they'll fully transition into doing the [SSCE] requirements, which is writing a paper, doing a speech, making a documentary, and doing an action project plan.

Importantly, student representatives pushed to ensure that the requirements could be met during the school day so that the SSCE is “accessible to every student,” which, as one student explained, is the “whole goal of this project.” They also supported less rigorous GPA requirements because they didn’t think students should have to get “perfect grades” to earn the SSCE. Instead, the students we interviewed expressed that the most important aspect of the program was getting students to “try something” that “attempts to make some change in [their] community,” and as such should be accessible to more than just high academic achievers.



Students' Motivations to Earn the SSCE

Students who earned the SSCE during the 2020–2021 school year reported a variety of motivations for doing so. One of the most frequently cited was the chance to receive recognition from their school beyond their diploma. Of course, students also noted that earning the SSCE would be beneficial for job and college applications as a way to “set yourself apart from other students” by showing that “you were passionate about something and you saw through with it.”

Another group of students said they were motivated by the chance to get involved with their local community because they “hadn’t had many opportunities [to do that] before.” A similar sentiment was echoed by students in RUSD whose teacher had emphasized the importance of making change in the community. As one student recalled:

[Our teacher] showed us a few really inspirational videos of Malala and other students our age who are making change in their communities, all across the world ... And I think seeing that other students could do it really motivated me to say, “Hey, I can do that as well. This will be really fun to do and this will be really impactful on, not only myself, but the people around me, my school community, my Riverside community.” So I think just the thought of being able to do something that not every teenager does yet is super important for the entire community.

Indeed, the unique appeal of an opportunity to take action coupled with the potential to make a real difference was a potent incentive for students to pursue the SSCE, and one that consistently bore results: After students completed their projects, it was common for them to report feelings of gratitude and pride because they were “able to accomplish something that might have seemed difficult at first and [they] did it for a good cause to help the community.”

It should also be noted that some students didn’t learn about the SSCE until partway through the program’s inaugural year, after they had already started working on a civic engagement project as part of their school’s existing curriculum. As a result, these students viewed the SSCE as a motivator to continue going the “extra step,” and even to create a legacy in a year of remote learning due to the global pandemic.



Project Exemplars

In this section we highlight four notable projects completed by students in pursuit of the SSCE:

Hostile Architecture

One student received national recognition for her participation in Project Soapbox, a public speaking program organized by Mikva Challenge that calls on young people to speak out about issues that affect them and their communities. She chose to spread awareness about the use and implications of hostile architecture in her community and in other cities in the United States. As the student explained, hostile architecture is a phenomenon where benches are “removed or they have spikes built into them or these weird armrests so that you have to sit up straight in them and everyone says it’s to prevent loitering, but it’s really anti-homeless.” In addition to educating listeners about the issue of hostile architecture, she issued a call to action to contact corporations and government officials to report instances of hostile architecture in one’s community.

Vaccine Hesitancy

After engaging with family and community members who refused to be vaccinated against COVID-19, a pair of students decided to explore vaccine hesitancy within their community. To do so, they conducted research about the reasons people may not want to get the vaccine and then interviewed eight community members (e.g., local doctors and parents) to document a wide variety of viewpoints on the issue. The pair then presented a documentary video highlighting the history of vaccinations as well as the stories of their participants, which was featured on the district’s website. According to one of the students involved with the project:

[We] wanted to revolve our project not based on only making sure that we’re telling people about the dangers of being anti-vaccination, but we also wanted to make sure that people understood that there sometimes are reasons that people chose to be this ... And in order to change that mindset for the

better, we need to understand the reasoning behind their choices on not getting vaccinated. Because sometimes they have exterior reasons, such as personal experiences that have happened to them that could be traumatizing for them, which could be hard for them to change their mind.

The pair expressed their hope to share their work over the summer with underrepresented communities nearby, and they are in the process of creating a children’s book about vaccines.



Bias, Discrimination, and Racism in Schools

Inspired by the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests, a group of four students of color decided to investigate the frequency with which their peers faced bias, discrimination, and/or racism at school. To do so, the group created and distributed a survey to students in their district and conducted one-on-one interviews with a handful of their peers. With approximately 40 respondents, the survey revealed that 66% of participating students had experienced bias, discrimination, and/or racism at school. In an effort to address this critical issue, the group reached out to a number of district representatives and successfully scheduled four Zoom meetings with the superintendent, two school board members, and one representative from the county office of education. During these meetings, the group presented their findings and proposed a solution to mandate implicit bias and sensitivity training for all staff members to better equip them to prevent and handle incidents of bias, discrimination, and/or racism. Although the group has yet to receive an update regarding their proposal, they greatly appreciated the frank and open discussion with district representatives and they are optimistic that upcoming seniors will continue their efforts.

Reproductive Rights Awareness

Another group of students teamed up to raise awareness about reproductive rights within their school district. To start, the group surveyed students about their views on the material taught in health classes, particularly around the topic of sexual education. The results of the survey showed that information presented on birth control was “vague” and “difficult to retain.” To address this problem, the group created a podcast episode with a doctor from Planned Parenthood to discuss contraceptives, sexually transmitted infections, and other reproductive health issues. The group also reached out to health teachers and school officials to discuss gaps in the current sexual education curriculum and to draft an education plan that would make information related to reproductive rights more effective and accessible to students.



Reflections on the Process of Earning the SSCE

The process by which students earn the SSCE is a decision made by local education agencies (LEAs). As a result, students in one school district may have an entirely different experience than students in another district. In the Anaheim Union High School District (AUHSD), students are given the chance to earn the SSCE by engaging in civic engagement projects built into a school’s existing curriculum. The projects may be completed over the course of a year, in small groups or individually, and students are encouraged to focus on an issue they are passionate about. Students appreciated having such flexible parameters, which allowed them to “put their own spin on it” and made the assignment feel “really achievable and very reasonable.” Since AUHSD students did not learn about the SSCE until midway through the year, they reported being motivated to pursue their projects primarily by an intrinsic interest to “see something done” about their issues, with the SSCE simply serving “as a reward for being passionate.” In order to determine those students eligible to earn the SSCE, one AUHSD teacher met with each project group in the spring to reflect on their progress and to outline final steps before graduation. This teacher also required students to maintain a digital journal to catalogue their feelings at various stages throughout the project, which students said helped them to identify and reflect on how much had changed from one point in time to the next. In particular, students acknowledged that one outcome of the project was a positive change in their beliefs about whether they had the power, capability, and right to seek change in their schools and communities.

Much like AUHSD, RUSD integrated SSCE civic learning opportunities into the school curriculum. In the program's initial year, students were given a few months to complete a civic engagement project, but this structure is set to change next year because students reported feeling "rushed." Instead, students will explore potential research topics in Grades 9 and 10 and then launch their civic engagement projects at the start of Grade 11, in the hopes that additional time to prepare will allow students to delve more deeply into the taking action aspect of civic engagement. By embedding the SSCE requirements into course work, teachers are not tasked with additional grading; instead, they are encouraged to set up periodic "grade checks" with students to ensure that progress is made throughout the year. As one might expect, students appreciated that the grading timeline was "lenient ... because [teachers] knew that students would get information differently and it would take longer to do interviews for some, depending on who they were interviewing, and the documentary would take longer for some because the information was different." Moreover, the open structure of the culminating self-reflection assignment, whereby students were given a set of questions and they could choose which ones to answer, was "helpful" because there weren't "any restrictions" on what students could include. Finally, students said their pursuit of the SSCE as a class assignment instilled a sense of purpose to their homework because it actually "mattered" to them, gave them a "feeling of accomplishment," and even forced them out of their "own little bubble."



Youth Civic Engagement and the SSCE: Recommendations for Schools

One of the first steps districts and schools can take in supporting the implementation of the SSCE is to bring consistent, wide-scale awareness to the program. All too often, interesting opportunities are presented to students only once or are otherwise underpublicized (e.g., simply posted on a website and easily missed or forgotten). Instead, the students we interviewed recommended using assemblies, monthly announcements, and/or dedicated class time to emphasize the meaning and importance of the SSCE.

Equally important is ensuring that the teachers spearheading the program are themselves civically engaged. To be sure, students will need mentors who not only have a good understanding of current issues in the United States and around the world, but who also know where and how students can become meaningfully involved in civic and political events. As one student recalled:

[Certain teachers] really took the time out of their day to read literature about these things, to watch the videos ... There is a super-select amount of teachers that would do this, and I wish there was more exposure, more teachers who were trained about these things.

When teachers are themselves civically engaged, their civic knowledge is more likely to trickle down to their students. That being said, as the SSCE grows in popularity, students are increasingly likely to reach out to district- and school-level representatives for support with their civic engagement projects. All educators, and not just those directly involved in implementing the SSCE, should be prepared to engage with students on these matters, and to take their concerns seriously.

What's more, students benefit from exposure to civic engagement as early and often as possible. Take AUHSD, for example, where middle school students get the opportunity to create soapbox speeches, conduct research, and engage in self- and peer-review exercises in their English language arts, science, and history classes. After conducting research on mental health and cyber bullying, one middle school student successfully petitioned her school to create an "off the grid" day where students and teachers completely disengage from technology and social media. By developing research, presentation, and reflection skills as early as elementary or middle school and across content areas, young students receive multiple opportunities for practice that will better prepare them for their final or capstone projects in high school. Furthermore, when students are exposed to civic

engagement early and often, schools send a clear message about the importance of civic education:

If we have every student in every classroom learning about civics—whether you're in a history class or a science class or a math class or any other course, whether you're taking an elective or a core class—if every student is applying the things that they're learning to civics and is being encouraged by their teacher to apply for the [SSCE], and then also developing projects in those courses or outside of their courses in pursuit of that recognition, then we can see every student in the district had that, and that would be a good thing.

Finally, districts and schools can play a crucial role in bridging the gap between students and the larger community. One helpful approach is to create a database of community partners who are available to students looking for mentors, experts, volunteer opportunities, and internships. One student we interviewed acknowledged that her teacher's "connections" with community professionals and others "already engaged in the community" helped her group identify individuals willing to be interviewed as experts, which was integral to the success of their civic engagement project.



Youth Civic Engagement and the SSCE: Students' Recommendations for Other Students

Across several districts, the students we interviewed definitively agreed that anyone interested in earning the SSCE should take care to do two things: (1) choose a passion project, and (2) get started as soon as possible. With any long-term project, it can be difficult to maintain interest and momentum if students are not intrinsically motivated to learn about an issue. When students choose a topic that resonates with them, the passion will show through in their work. Of course, without enough time to identify, research, and take action on an issue, students will feel overwhelmed and their ability to make meaningful change will be thwarted. Indeed, the taking action component of a civic engagement project asks students to consider and pursue potential solutions, which is likely to involve a multistep process that depends on the cooperation of community members. But students can be set up for success with the proper encouragement and time management scaffolding.

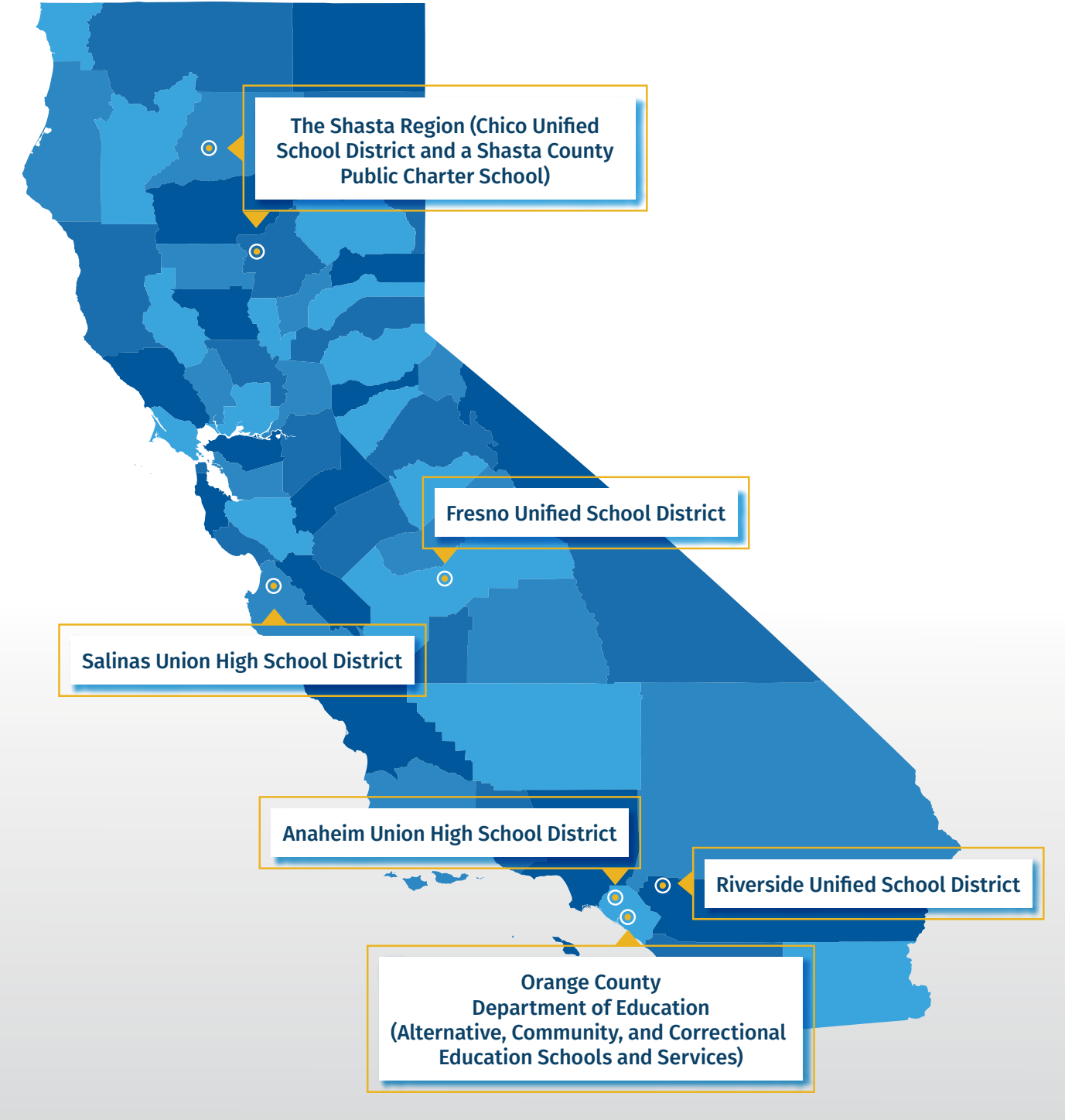
Summary

In conclusion, students are hungry for civic learning opportunities that connect them to real-world issues and robust implementation of the SSCE is a way to facilitate these experiences. To do so, however, districts and schools need to integrate civic learning opportunities across grade levels and content areas as well as connect students to meaningful community partnerships. Furthermore, requirements to earn the SSCE should be reasonable and achievable to make the program accessible across diverse student populations.

Endnotes:

²² Benner, M., Brown, C., & Jeffrey, A. (2019). *Elevating student voice in education*. Center for American Progress, Washington, DC. <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education-k-12/reports/2019/08/14/473197/elevating-student-voice-education/>; Cohen, C. J. (2010). *Democracy remixed: Black youth and the future of American politics*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Portraits of Early Adopters from Across California

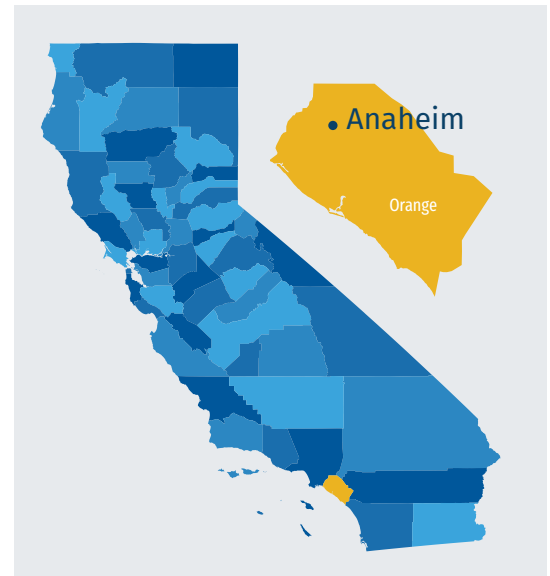
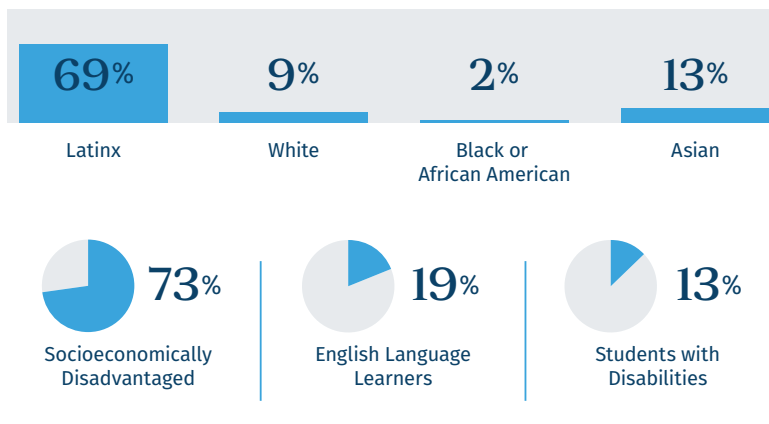


Early Adopter Profile

Anaheim Union High School District

DISTRICT FACTS

Total Population **29,832**



Data Source: California Department of Education, California School Dashboard, 2019-2020

“When you care about something, the level of effort you put into it, the personal connection is a lot different. And that’s truly what you remember years from now. And so that’s the other thing that’s so meaningful about this is you see students from all socioeconomic levels in our district who just feel empowered because they’ve been given voice and choice.” – District Leader

In the 2019–2020 school year, Anaheim Union High School District (AUHSD) educated close to 30,000 students in Grades 7–12. Over the past five years, 16 middle and high schools in the district have been recognized by the state as a California Democracy School. As part of the California Democracy School Civic Learning Initiative, these 16 schools guide students through five phases of high-quality civic learning at least once:

1. Framing an **inquiry** about an issue or problem that needs to be addressed at the local, state, or national level.
2. Engaging in an **investigation** of the issue or problem to reveal a variety of perspectives relative to the cause and possible solutions.

3. **Engaging in a civil dialogue** that reveals the diverse perspectives identified in the investigation.
4. **Communicating a conclusion** after careful analysis of the many perspectives presented.
5. **Taking informed action** to address the problem or issue in ways that are effective, responsible, and legal.

Source: California Democracy School Civic Learning Initiative, Los Angeles County Office of Education

The inquiry-to-action cycle of the California Democracy School Civic Learning Initiative aligns well with the criteria set forth by the California Department of Education for students to earn the State Seal of Civic Engagement (SSCE). As a result, AUHSD was able to build off of their existing training and curriculum structures to roll out the SSCE with early success. By the end of the first year of the SSCE, AUHSD had trained 243 teacher leaders and awarded the SSCE to 1,963 of its students.

SSCE Year 1

As AUHSD worked to expand the number of democracy schools in their district, they developed their own internal training program (based off of the Los Angeles County Office of Education's professional development series²³) that works with cohorts of 20–40 teachers at a time. The AUHSD training program is voluntary and open to teachers from all grade levels and subject areas. Each teacher who completes the three-day training program is designated a teacher leader eligible to apply for democracy school recognition, create a professional learning committee to further develop civic learning opportunities on campus, and encourage colleagues in other departments to attend the training program. When the California Department of Education began sharing information about the SSCE, teacher leaders in AUHSD were able to quickly form a small working group to design the district's criteria. Members of the working group anticipated that Year 1 of the district's implementation of the SSCE would be a "pilot opportunity to try their best and then adjust mistakes as needed," expecting that "they can't be perfect the first time."

At each California Democracy School site, students across a designated grade level (e.g., all ninth graders) participated in at least one cycle of the five phases of high-quality civic learning through a civic engagement project. Teachers kept track of the students who received a passing grade on the project and then submitted descriptions of how students' work met SSCE Criteria 3, 4, and 5 to two teachers designated as SSCE leads for the district. Meanwhile, counselors for the designated grade level monitored and reported on whether students had completed SSCE Criteria 1 and 2. Upon receiving this feedback, the two SSCE lead teachers were responsible for submitting the names of qualifying students to the state.

The rollout of the SSCE has also prompted teachers in AUHSD to develop shared curriculum materials. One group created a district-wide lesson about slowing the spread of COVID-19 within the community, which teachers could use with students in a remote learning environment. The lesson provided students with an opportunity to discuss the impact of COVID-19 on their families, demonstrated how to evaluate informational resources in order to effectively form their own opinions, and engaged students around civic engagement projects related to the pandemic (e.g., hosting town halls to encourage community members to socially distance and wear a mask). Since Year 1 of the rollout occurred during the pandemic, teachers may need to rework some of their lessons to best suit in-person learning.

Promising Approaches

At the curricular level, AUHSD is aiming to embed civic learning opportunities across multiple subjects. Although civic education is typically associated with history and social science classes, AUHSD is finding room in subjects such as English language arts (ELA), science, and a variety of electives to accommodate civic engagement projects. As one district leader explained:

When you think about civic engagement and learning, oftentimes history and social science feel constrained because there are a lot of content standards. So that's sometimes not even the ideal place for it. I mean, yes, it's a good place, but there's even more opportunity in ELA where they can use the speaking, the writing, and the reading standards to support civic learning engagement, or in the sciences, where the [Next Generation Science Standards] encourage looking at sustainability, or in arts where they could be drawing about it, or in music where they could be singing about it. So, it really can be cross-curricular.

When civic learning takes place across subjects, students are afforded multiple opportunities to participate in civic inquiry and civic action. This approach not only frames civic engagement as a school-wide priority and encourages an interdisciplinary team of teachers to collaborate, it also increases accessibility to students with unique interests and/or learning needs.

Notably, AUHSD is providing students with civic learning opportunities as early as seventh grade to give them ample time to hone their civic skills and dispositions before SSCE participation and graduation. In doing so, the district is reimagining what it means to be “prepared” to graduate: “If they are doing this in seventh grade and then eighth grade, can you imagine how powerful these kids will feel ... in 9th, 10th, 11th, and 12th grade or by the time they graduate?”

AUHSD district leaders and teachers have also negotiated “social contracts” with students to establish norms within a school or a classroom that allow students to feel safe and empowered. Only in such environments can controversial issues be discussed so that the experience is about learning to engage in civil discourse, and not about who is right or wrong. And only then will students be able to develop the relationships and skills necessary to provide constructive feedback and affirmations to their peers during project-based civic learning. In this sense, the culture and community created to facilitate civic engagement is just as important as the curricular content.

Challenges Faced

Despite AUHSD’s commitment to building cross-curricular civic learning opportunities, the transition has met resistance from some teachers in subjects outside of history and social science. According to one teacher leader in the district, it can be difficult to convince teachers in other content areas to teach about civics and democracy, either because they don’t believe it’s their responsibility or because they don’t feel confident in their ability to do so:

Trying to get other content areas, you may get a few from the school, but by and large they're like, "Well, this is not our thing." Or they don't feel confident—especially when it comes to addressing controversial issues, people are very scared ... [Or] they'll do it and they're not skilled at doing it in their class, and then it leads to problems.

In order to bridge this gap, AUHSD is actively working to recruit and train teachers from all content areas to promote civic learning, for example, by indicating to ELA teachers how novels can be effective tools to explore broader civic issues and by highlighting to science teachers the role of scientists in bringing about environmental policy change (e.g., the Flint water crisis).

Similarly, training teachers to implement the five phases of high-quality civic learning central to the California Democracy School Initiative can often mean changing the way teachers run their classrooms. At its core, the inquiry-to-action cycle puts students in charge of their own learning, which necessarily requires that teachers give up some control. This can be a difficult prospect for teachers whose own learning experiences were more traditional and teacher centered. As one district leader explained:

It's more about giving students the tools to make choices about what they want to investigate and to do that investigation, to teach them how to have those civil discourse conversations. I mean, you're really becoming more of a facilitator as a teacher, which is weird because again, as a teacher who is trained to be a “sage on the stage,” it makes you feel like, “Well, I'm not doing my job” or “I'm not doing enough.”

Ultimately, civic learning prepares students to become active participants in a democratic society and that requires shifting at least a portion of the “cognitive load” from the teacher to the student because that is where the growth happens: from the thinking, learning, and doing. The challenge, therefore, lies in imparting to teachers that this teaching style is not only acceptable, but exemplary.

Part of this disconnect stems from the fact that district administrators are fully on board with prioritizing civic learning in AUHSD, but not all school site administrators are invested. While one teacher leader recognized how “lucky” they are to have district support, if a principal is not willing to dedicate even a day of professional development to civic learning, then it’s not really a school priority:

The school admin may be on board on paper, but they’re not necessarily going to dedicate a [professional development] day to doing any civic learning. They can get on board to qualify as a Democracy School or [when] we’re up for the Civic Learning Award again, but if it’s not immediate fire under their feet, it just goes away, and I’m the lone person or maybe one other person reminding them that this is important.

Without consistent support at all levels throughout the district, efforts to build cross-curricular civic learning opportunities with well-trained, confident teachers are likely to be thwarted.

Support and Enabling Conditions

One of the most important conditions enabling civic learning across the district is strong and consistent administrative support. In AUHSD, the school board is “fully aware” of the SSCE and excited to promote the program’s success. Furthermore, the district’s superintendent, Michael Matsuda, was recently named a Champion of Civics, in honor of his commitment to civics education both in and out of the classroom. As Mr. Matsuda explained in his acceptance speech: ***“Democracy and modeling democracy—we’re not born with that, that’s not in our DNA. And what institution is primed to teach that and model it, but public schools?”***

The California Civic Learning Awards are also an important incentive and motivator for district and school leaders in AUHSD. To date, AUHSD has earned 28 California Civic Learning Awards of Excellence, six in the last three years. These awards not only



recognize school sites for their commitment to civic education, but they signify that civic excellence is an achievement worth celebrating in the community. Moreover, the publication of student names as well as the total number of students who earned the SSCE at each school site gives teachers “something to strive for” and puts a “fire under their feet” to prioritize the work.

“Democracy and modeling democracy—we’re not born with that, that’s not in our DNA. And what institution is primed to teach that and model it, but public schools?”

As noted earlier, the support of top officials is not enough to fully scale this work. Although the incorporation of civic learning priorities into the district’s local control accountability plan (LCAP)

allows for money to be allocated to training, supplies, and substitute coverage, the facilitation of such efforts is crucial to a successful rollout of the SSCE. Therefore, school site administrators will need to provide teachers with dedicated professional development days or paid time off for training, planning, and collaboration time in order to further AUHSD's progress.

Looking Ahead

As AUHSD looks ahead to the second year of the SSCE, a number of goals and next steps are top of mind. For example, district leaders are excited about the prospect of expanding professional development opportunities beyond the basics of civic learning. The hope is that teachers who have already participated in the district's internal training program will attend additional workshops covering more advanced topics, such as facilitating discussions around controversial issues. At the same time, AUHSD is partnering with feeder elementary school districts to "share what they know with others" and to facilitate "vertical teaming," so that students' civic learning can begin as early as kindergarten.

At the school-site level, educators are tweaking their curriculum to focus on specific skills or to expand opportunities related to civic learning. As a case in point, one teacher leader we interviewed has historically focused on the "hard skills" of taking action and empowering student voice in her classroom, but next year she plans to build students' "soft skills" as well:

I always tell my students, part of this experience is teaching you what to do when you don't get a response to your email. Or you need to follow up with a meeting, or you need to prepare for the meeting. Do your homework, do your research, and learn how to talk to people ... What happens when something in your plan doesn't happen as you planned it, and you have to pivot to your plan B?

Meanwhile, another teacher leader is focused on expanding the school's 12th-grade inquiry-to-action cycle into a full-fledged capstone project that would begin in Grade 9 and culminate in Grade 12. In doing so, he hopes to transform civic education into a series of learning opportunities that build off of each other, rather than a one-time project undertaken at the end of high school.

In the long term, AUHSD hopes to be recognized as a California Democracy District, wherein students are effectively guaranteed to receive high-quality civic learning opportunities as an enrollee. As one school leader explained, students will "leave knowing how to take action and how to be involved in the community in a civil way." Stated differently, AUHSD wants to help students identify issues they're passionate about, and then teach them to make change using the skills developed through meaningful civic education.

Summary

At the end of Year 1, AUHSD reported that 1,963 students had earned the SSCE—the highest number of any district in the state. This early success was not a happy accident, however. In fact, the district's participation in the California Democracy School Civic Learning Initiative over the past five years allowed AUHSD to build the capacity of 243 educators who were intrinsically motivated to provide high-quality civic education to their students. With this foundation, schools across the district implemented the inquiry-to-action cycle directly into their curriculum, which served to afford every student the opportunity to qualify for the SSCE. And though much work remains to further expand these opportunities, AUHSD is laying the groundwork for systemic civic learning in the district.

Endnotes:

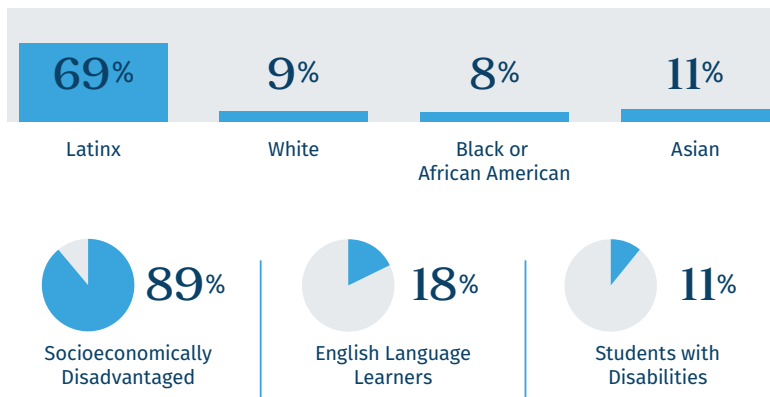
²³ <https://www.lacoe.edu/Curriculum-Instruction/History-Social-Science/California-Democracy-School>

Early Adopter Profile

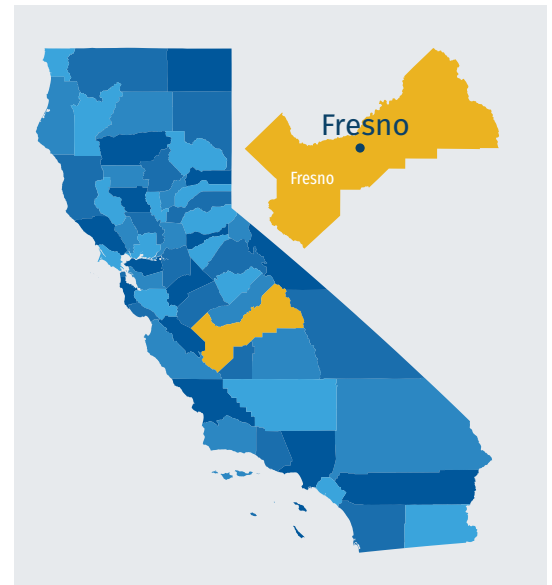
Fresno Unified School District

DISTRICT FACTS

Total Population **70,860**



Data Source: California Department of Education, California School Dashboard, 2019-2020



“ We were only supposed to meet once and these kids are so excited about meeting and talking about what they want to plan for next year. We’re now starting our fourth meeting. And these are kids that would not necessarily otherwise have a voice. They would not necessarily be engaged. They would not necessarily be the people who are shaping culture and community ... [A]nd they are coming together and feeling like they’re part of a community in a way that they haven’t before. And so they are leading the charge.”

— School Leader

In the 2019–2020 school year, Fresno Unified School District (FUSD) educated more than 70,000 students in their prekindergarten through adult learning programs. As a large school district, FUSD is applying a regional approach to its adoption of the State Seal of Civic Engagement (SSCE) with Fresno High School serving as the “epicenter” of its initiative. In this regard, Fresno High School will work with the middle and elementary schools within its region to integrate civic learning opportunities across school levels. Thus far, FUSD has proposed a three-year plan that aims to connect the SSCE with service-learning pathways already in place within the district’s social-emotional learning, ethnic studies, and career technical education programs. At the same time, FUSD is developing ways to track student participation in these programs to serve as a model for other regions across the district. FUSD’s superintendent has voiced strong support for civic learning, and efforts are underway to integrate civic aims into the districts’ graduate profile.

Fresno High School was chosen as the epicenter for implementation of the SSCE in large part because of its established International Baccalaureate (IB) diploma program, which features service-learning milestones that can be expanded to meet the SSCE criteria proposed by the district. The demographics of the school are also representative of the larger district with 91% of students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds and 74% of students identifying as Latinx. Moreover, Fresno High School does not require an entrance application, and every student takes at least one IB class by the time they graduate. With IB's focus on inquiry and action through service, school and teacher leaders at Fresno High School have been working to increase student participation in school-wide service-learning projects centered around a two-question framework: How can I create a better community locally? How do I engage with a community nationally and/or internationally?

SSCE Pilot Year

To avoid any "false starts" with the SSCE rollout, Fresno High School first implemented a year-long pilot program with a core group of administrators, teacher leaders, and students. While one school leader found it "daunting" to hold meetings with 50 students over Zoom, she acknowledged the importance of being authentically vulnerable and admitted that the school needed the students' help to make the program successful.

During this pilot year, staff members in the core group spent significant time examining their own system to determine where the energy around service learning was already focused. Ultimately, they discovered that some staff had established connections with local peer-mentoring groups, while others had standing partnerships with the athletics office and various regional schools. As another school leader explained, taking the time to evaluate their own system helped to increase buy-in from staff:

I think we would have alienated the people that were already doing service if we had not embraced and acknowledged and recognized their efforts going into this. And so we went slow. We stayed in inquiry for a while, and had to figure out how to leverage what was already happening at our school site.

At the same time, staff members in the core group reviewed IB service-learning rubrics to determine how and where they aligned with the SSCE. This exercise helped the team crystallize which learning objectives needed to be incorporated into their SSCE criteria. A few staff members in the core group also met with neighboring counties and school districts through the Fresno County Civic Learning Partnership to share ideas and ensure that their SSCE criteria were similarly rigorous:

In order for it to mean something, because we're talking about service in the community, it has to have buy-in from community members, business members, and colleges, so that if they see that on a résumé, it signals: "Oh, wow, this student did go above and beyond" and now it moves the student ahead for this position, job, or whatever.

Another critical component of the pilot program was testing whether the school's learning management system, ManageBac, could be used to document students' progress toward fulfilling the SSCE criteria. Currently, every student at Fresno High School has access to a ManageBac account regardless of their IB diploma candidacy. The system allows students to set learning goals, upload pictures, videos, and documents, and send internal and external emails to adult supervisors to verify student participation in an activity. Importantly, students can begin creating their IB portfolios in ninth grade, providing them with ample time for completion before graduation. Moreover, as a student populates a portfolio, advisors can easily track their progress and follow up with them accordingly. While advisors still need to manually review students' posts and written reflections, Fresno High School is currently formulating a plan wherein each staff member is responsible for reviewing 10–20 students' portfolios.

Although FUSD did not award the SSCE to any students during this pilot year, students at Fresno High School who completed a service-learning project and who documented their progress through ManageBac received a silver cord to wear during the graduation ceremony.

SSCE Year 1

Fresno High School intends to officially roll out the SSCE during the 2021–2022 school year. The initiative will begin with 12th-grade students through two content areas: the Expository Reading and Writing Curriculum (ERWC) because it reaches all 12th graders and already incorporates service learning into its culminating projects, and Economics because it is well suited to tie service learning to civic learning. Furthermore, engaging two departments in the initial rollout will better distribute the workload and avoid placing the entire burden on a single group of teachers—thereby improving the SSCE’s chances of success in the region.

Meanwhile, FUSD will form a stakeholder committee composed of educators, students, parents, and community members (e.g., local businesses, universities, and nonprofits) from across the district to gather feedback and input on a draft of the SSCE criteria. The goal is to present a finalized version of the SSCE criteria to the school board for approval by December 2021. At the same time, FUSD will present a proposal to add service learning to the district’s graduate profile in the hopes of aligning the graduate profile with a portfolio system for civic learning. Finally, throughout the fall semester, FUSD will start training teachers to integrate the SSCE into their curricula and reach out to student groups and the community to promote awareness of the SSCE.

Promising Approaches

In order to build momentum around the SSCE, FUSD focused on recruiting school site “champions” who were passionate about civic education and provided them with a stipend. As one district leader explained, if someone is assigned to the task, then “it’s just going to be a numbers game and it’s not going to be transformative... it’s not going to help kids change their communities.” Instead, FUSD is looking for educators that can serve as liaisons to students, their families, and the greater community.

FUSD and Fresno High School have also thought carefully about which indicators would best gauge the effects of the SSCE on students. One long-term goal of the district is to see 100% of students earning the SSCE; in the meantime, however, they intend to monitor metrics such as attendance, suspensions, and school climate and culture. Because the SSCE asks students to address real-life issues in their schools and communities, those participating in the program are likely to experience a measurable increase in positive and meaningful engagement with their peers, teachers, and/or community members. Additionally, Fresno High School will track student participation in the SSCE along a number of demographic indicators to allow them to identify and address any issues of inequity. While such a measure is not required by the California Department of Education, it aligns with the state’s emphasis on accessibility and inclusion in the legislation and guidance materials.

During the remote learning phase of the pandemic, Fresno High School instituted a virtual Monday advisory period wherein all faculty and most staff members met weekly with small groups of students. In one of these sessions, advisors announced that the entire school would undertake a service-learning project during the 2021–2022 school year. After watching a video and participating in an activity about awareness of social and political issues, each advisory class elected a student captain to help plan the school-wide project and to report back to their peers on important updates. The response from students, especially students who were typically disengaged from school activities, was so overwhelmingly positive that teachers began reaching out to request additional lessons and training around service learning:

When we sent [the announcement] out for teachers to supply to their advisory classes, all of a sudden adults got really excited about service learning. So I'm getting emails constantly from the department saying, "Hey, we're planning. And we want to know how to do service learning for next year. How do we attach this to our lessons? How do we include this in our rubrics?" All of a sudden there's a conversation and an awareness about "How does this impact instruction? How can I support kids?"

With this initiative, Fresno High School generated authentic buy-in from students and teachers while also creating a space for underrepresented students to develop leadership skills and take action around issues important to them. What's more, as planning for the school-wide service-learning project continued, teachers from a variety of subject areas were creating lists of extension opportunities that could be embedded into their own curricular units. As a result, students will have the chance to engage with the project in almost every class as well as at the school level.

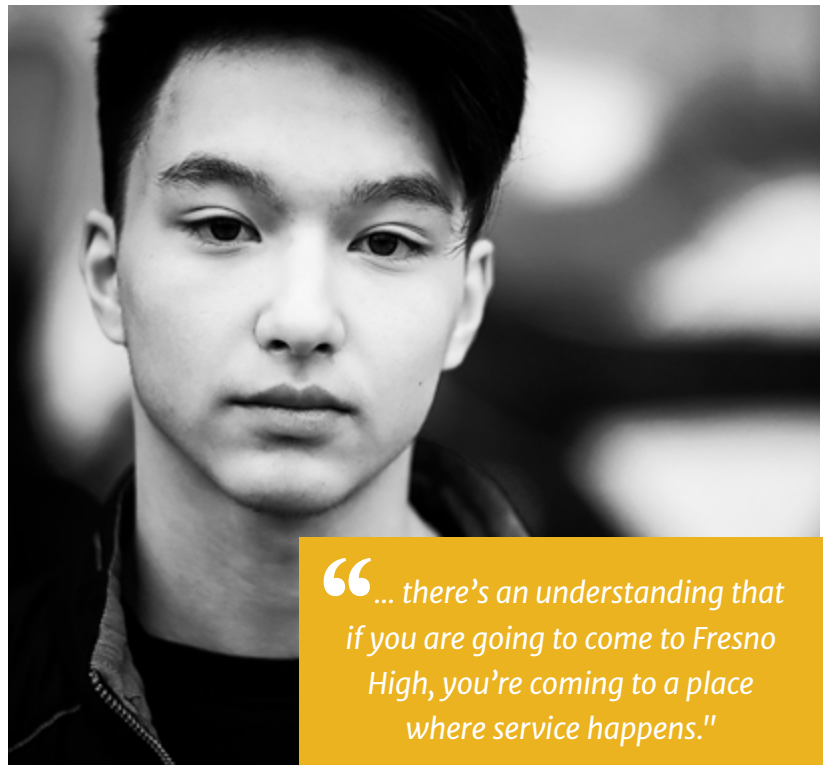
Challenges Faced

Early on in the SSCE process, FUSD struggled to get buy-in from officials at the school site it first approached to serve as the regional model. Even with robust district support, when school leaders resist prioritizing civic learning, it is incredibly challenging to move the work forward. According to one district leader, principals and vice principals determine which topics will be covered in professional development and "if nobody is facilitating [civic] learning, it's not going to matter." Ultimately, for the SSCE to succeed district-wide, FUSD must connect with school leaders as much as teachers to build their capacity as civic educators.

On the other side of the equation, however, a school site that is motivated to roll out the SSCE faster or in greater depth than the district may need to forge its own path. For example, when the pandemic slowed efforts in FUSD, Fresno High School kept moving "even in the distance learning world." They held virtual meetings with the 50 students participating in the pilot program to continue planning the school-wide service-learning project, and school leaders began establishing connections with its regional schools. As one school leader explained, Fresno High School is committed to shifting the culture of the school toward a greater emphasis on civic learning, regardless of how the district chooses to proceed with the SSCE:

We're not waiting for the district to decide how they're going to move. We're moving ... so that there's an understanding that if you are going to come to Fresno High, you're coming to a place where service happens. You're coming to a place where we take part in our community and we're connected to our community.

The school leaders at Fresno High School believe the SSCE is "fundamental to who we are as a region" and therefore are moving forward enthusiastically.



“... there's an understanding that if you are going to come to Fresno High, you're coming to a place where service happens.”

Supports and Enabling Conditions

FUSD participates in the Fresno County Civic Learning Partnership led by John Minkler and Stephen Morris from the Civic Education Center. The partnership holds monthly meetings with representatives from local business, political, education, and civic sectors. District leaders from FUSD were given the chance to present their proposed SSCE criteria at one of the meetings to solicit feedback from the group. In addition, FUSD sponsored 20 teachers to attend a three-day professional development institute held by the Civic Education Center in August 2021.

Similarly, FUSD district and school leaders attended meetings with education consultant Hueling Lee, who is working with the California Special District Association to support school engagement, outreach, and partnerships around the SSCE. During these meetings, FUSD found it helpful to “hear from other educators, study what they were doing, and pull out components that would work for [them].” They also received personalized feedback about site implementation that was described as “invaluable.”

Looking Ahead

As FUSD looks ahead, both district and school leaders noted that creating a position for a civic learning specialist at the county level would be very helpful, especially as more schools take up the SSCE. Such a specialist would support training efforts, but could also help align SSCE criteria across districts and track statewide data. What’s more, a county civic learning specialist could build connections with representatives from programs such as ethnic studies, career technical education, and science to ensure that service-learning opportunities tied to civic issues are incorporated into every student’s schooling experience. Of course, FUSD could further signal a “true commitment” to the SSCE by creating positions for civic learning specialists at the district and school levels as well.

In future years, Fresno High School is considering establishing a designated time (e.g., a weekly advisory period) when all students can work on their portfolios together. These sessions would provide students with opportunities to seek feedback from their advisors, create a space for reflection, and help students get in the habit of tracking their progress. At the elementary- and middle-school levels, FUSD hopes to increase participation in the Fresno State Bonner Award (FSBA), which recognizes schools for their efforts on character and civic education. Even though it’s a local award, FUSD believes that the FSBA can incentivize schools to focus on civic learning and encourage students to pursue the SSCE in later grades.

Summary

At the start of the 2021–2022 school year, FUSD is ready to roll out the SSCE using a regional approach. Beginning with Fresno High School, school leaders plan to train ERWC and Economics teachers to incorporate service-learning projects into their curricula. Because these classes are available to all students regardless of whether they are on the IB, Advanced Placement, honors, or regular tracks, every student will have the opportunity to participate in a project that addresses civic issues. In addition, during its pilot year, Fresno High School worked with 50 student representatives to plan a school-wide service-learning project that will be integrated across a variety of subject areas throughout the 2021–2022 school year. Students will be instructed to track their involvement in these projects using the school’s learning management system, ManageBac. FUSD also expects to collect stakeholder feedback on their proposed SSCE criteria at the beginning of the school year and then submit a finalized proposal to the school board by December 2021. In all, the planning and preparation completed by FUSD in its pilot year helped them pave the way for meaningful implementation of the SSCE in the following school year.

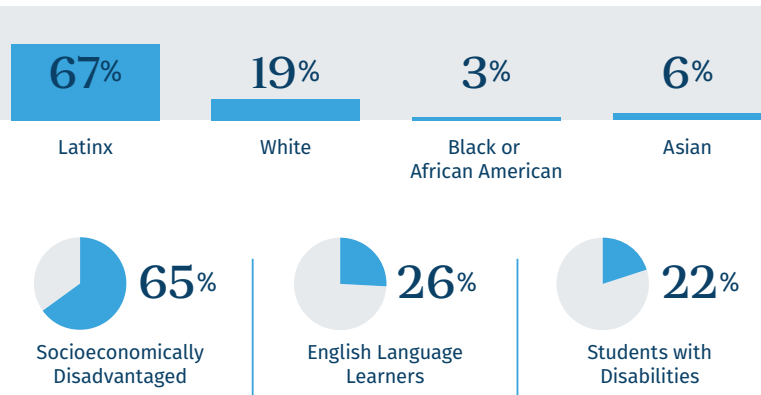
Early Adopter Profile

Orange County Department of Education

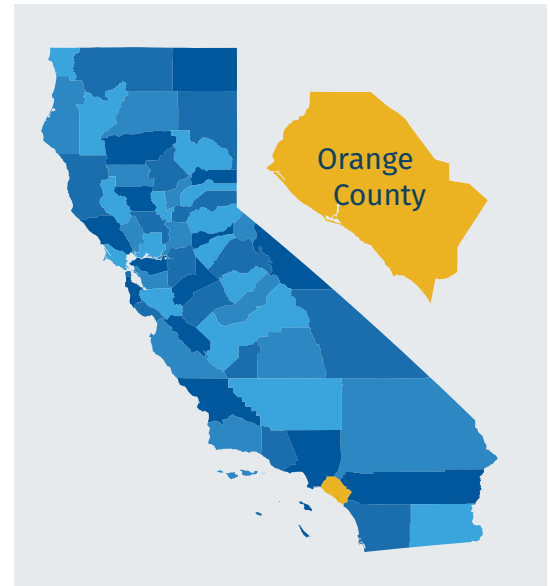
(Alternative, Community, and Correctional Education Schools and Services)

PROGRAM FACTS

Total Population **2,802**



Data Source: California Department of Education, California School Dashboard, 2019-2020



“ *I think this is where we’re preparing you for life, but your life is not just a job. You’re going to live in a world where you will have the power to make a difference. I think for a lot of our students, they don’t know they have the power yet.”* – District Leader

In the 2019–2020 school year, the Orange County Department of Education (OCDE) educated 2,802 students in its Alternative, Community, and Correctional Education Schools and Services (ACCESS) across four programs and 52 district locations: ACCESS Community Schools, ACCESS Juvenile Court Schools, Orange County Community Schools (including the Community Home Education Program and Pacific Coast High School), and the Division of Special Education Services. The traditional school day for OCDE students involves a combination of in-person learning, virtual classrooms, and independent study, depending on the individual needs of the student.

Since 2008, OCDE has been working with the University of California, Irvine’s History Project (UCIHP) to develop curricular units around historical novels. Based on the success of this partnership, OCDE and UCIHP are now building an elective course to help students earn the State Seal of Civic Engagement (SSCE). Given the varied and complex structures of OCDE’s alternative education programs, the overarching goal of this course is to make earning the SSCE accessible for every student in every setting offered by the district.

SSCE Pilot Year

Without a model for civic engagement in alternative education programs, OCDE and UCIHP started from scratch. As a result, they spent the last year creating and testing a brand-new curriculum with a small group of teachers. Although it is not yet finalized, the curriculum will be structured as follows:

- 1. Course A will cover a range of civic education content including how the federal, state, and local governments affect people’s lives, how people can influence state and local governments, and the role of nongovernmental organizations and tribal governments in civic society.**
- 2. Course B will focus on the civic engagement research project and culminate with a presentation and reflection component.**

Students who have already completed a civics course will have the option to directly enroll in Course B; all other students will start with Course A and then proceed to Course B. Importantly, each course will be offered as an elective, which ensures that students will receive credits for their participation that will go toward their diploma.

UCIHP is also in the process of digitizing both courses using the Canvas platform to allow students working independently, at home, or transitioning from one location to another to participate. Once the courses are finalized, the SSCE stakeholder committee will provide information and training sessions to principals and teachers throughout OCDE.

Promising Approaches

A key focus for OCDE and UCIHP was to design a curriculum that was relevant and meaningful to its specific population of students. Indeed, both courses center on local issues in the community that are relevant to the students’ lived experiences. At the same time, the curriculum expands on the definition of civic engagement so that the projects are less about “going above and beyond” and more about “making connections between what students are learning and what they will be doing after they leave the program.” In other words, the goal is to empower students by translating their learning into real-life action.

The structure of Course B also aims to push students away from passive learning and towards the co-construction of a research project with the guidance of their teachers. In this sense, the course is untraditional because it will provide students with a new way to interact with adults—a fitting way to end their experiences as upperclassmen and prepare them for entry into a postsecondary world. Moreover, as one district leader explained, the course presents students with ideas about “what the future could look like” for them, and it equips them with important skills that will “help them stand out from other individuals their age” as they apply for jobs and colleges.

Challenges Faced

As an early adopter of the SSCE, one of the biggest challenges for OCDE and UCIHP has been determining the appropriate level of rigor for Course B. On the one hand, if the expectations are too overwhelming, students are unlikely to buy into the course or may get discouraged by a lack of progress. On the other hand, if the expectations are too easy, then the SSCE loses its value or becomes an exercise in superficial civic engagement. While this is a difficult question for all school districts, the structural hurdles presented by some of the alternative education programs in OCDE further complicate the situation. For example, students in ACCESS Juvenile Court Schools are not allowed to access the internet or venture into their communities

because they are incarcerated. With these restrictions, how can students conduct meaningful research or take action to solve a community problem? As another example, some students are transitory and may attend a school site for only a few days or weeks in the course of a school year, making it difficult for them to keep track of course work and participate in long-term projects.

On the other side of the equation, it will also be challenging to generate buy-in from teachers, especially those teaching Course B online. While many online courses are student driven, teachers will need to consistently check in with students to follow their progress on a civic engagement research project. This may seem fairly routine on its face, but it can be difficult to reach students who are transitory, who do not show up to class regularly, or who do not have consistent access to the internet. Relatedly, teachers may be intimidated by the prospect of trying out a new curriculum, or they may not feel comfortable ceding a level of control in the classroom to allow for the co-construction of a research project. To address these hurdles, OCDE will need to actively encourage and support schools to adopt the SSCE curriculum to ensure that all teachers will make it available to their students.

Supports and Enabling Conditions

OCDE offers students year-round, continuous enrollment in its alternative education programs. This flexible structure, coupled with the option for students to take Courses A and B in-person or online, means that the district is able to provide ongoing instruction that “meets the student where they are.” Such an approach is particularly important for student populations who have gaps in their course work, unpredictable scheduling needs, or variable start dates. Additionally, the versatile nature of OCDE’s civic engagement research project means that it can be completed in individual, group, or class formats, depending on a student’s educational setting. In OCDE, it is not uncommon for day-school programs to serve Grades 9-12 together in one class, or for some students to be enrolled in a class for the purposes of independent study. Because students come to the district at different times and through different programs, the flexibility of the SSCE curriculum is critical for optimizing accessibility.

A number of schools in OCDE have existing learning opportunities in place that can be leveraged to increase teacher participation in the SSCE. For example, one school hosts mock trials every semester, which could easily be adjusted to align with the civic engagement research project in Course B. Additionally, as several teachers have previously implemented service-learning projects in their curricula, some may readily adjust their lessons to fit the SSCE and/or serve as mentors for other interested teachers. OCDE should therefore focus early recruitment and training efforts in such areas.

Looking Ahead

Even though the SSCE curriculum will be offered as an elective, OCDE and UCIHP hope that the course will evolve into something of an “informal requirement” among teachers and students. In other words, the goal is to create learning opportunities that are so rewarding and empowering that everyone chooses to get involved. As one of the UCIHP staff members working with students in ACCESS Juvenile Court Schools explained:

I would like to see this become a tool of empowerment ... to see that become the standard, especially because students in ACCESS are prepackaged with a consciousness about government and politics. I saw this in my first year working with [UCIHP], when we did a project on To Kill A Mockingbird. It's about lawyers and a trial, on the fairness of our government, and we included a section on whether your right to receive counsel is actually being

respected. Essentially, the argument was no because typically you get 10 minutes, if that, with your lawyer, and then you're rushed through the system to get the best plea bargain. Soon after going through our work, one student met with his lawyer and he said, "Hey, you're trying to rush me through and constitutionally, I get more time with you."

With a host of passionate teachers committed to the well-being and success of their students, the SSCE curriculum can further equip OCDE to support students in realizing their potential in the community, developing the competence and skills to share their voice, and viewing themselves as capable changemakers.

In the future, OCDE and UCIHP also hope to create a collection of work samples that students can use to inform the development of their own projects. With access to such a resource, teachers and students will be exposed to a "diversity of projects and ideas" that ideally will inspire even more action and help to build connections between OCDE schools and their surrounding community. Indeed, as the SSCE curriculum is fine-tuned in the years to come, OCDE can create supporting infrastructure that will allow teachers and students to tackle issues alongside and in collaboration with local businesses, nonprofit organizations, and other educational institutions.

Summary

Although OCDE and UCIHP are still finalizing their SSCE curriculum, this work will ultimately serve as one of the first models for civic engagement focused on implementing the SSCE in alternative education programs in California. Over the course of the next year, district leaders plan to recruit and train teachers to implement their two-part course, both in-person and online, so that all students are given the option to participate. At the same time, OCDE and UCIHP are collecting feedback from teachers on the stakeholder committee for the purpose of refining the SSCE curriculum to meet the unique needs of OCDE's student population.



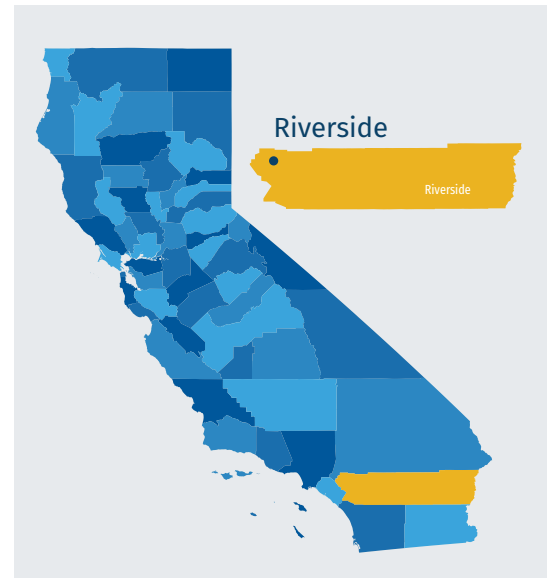
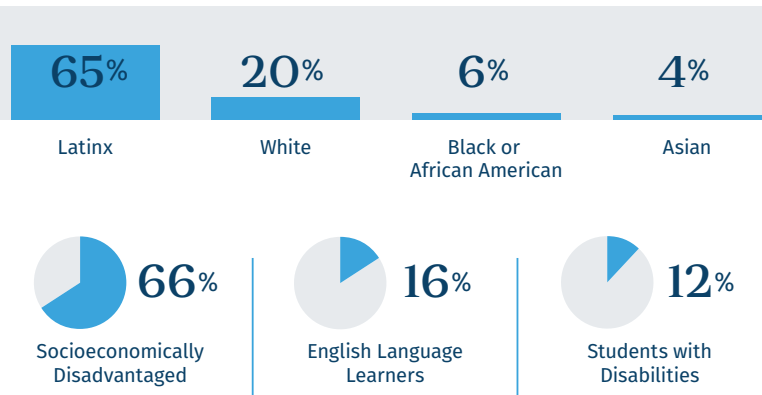
“ I would like to see this become a tool of empowerment ... to see that become the standard, especially because students in ACCESS are prepackaged with a consciousness about government and politics.”

Early Adopter Profile

Riverside Unified School District

DISTRICT FACTS

Total Population **40,204**



Data Source: California Department of Education, California School Dashboard, 2019-2020

“ My feeling with education is that so often it’s sort of siloed and not connected to the real world. [...] I really want education for all students, but especially as they get older, to have it be meaningful. Something that they’re passionate about and something that they feel like they actually, not only are just sitting there learning and taking a test, but they’re actually applying it. The other thing is, I think it’s important that they are civic minded and aware of the issues in their world and ways that they can actually take action to hopefully make change or at least influence change. And I think that’s a powerful tool for them as they finish high school and go off to college, to get them involved.” – Teacher Leader

The Riverside Unified School District (RUSD) serves a total of 41,617 students across a politically diverse Southern California community. In 2017, RUSD embarked on a district-wide effort to advance civic education in its schools. The first step they took, in partnership with the Civic Engagement Research Group (CERG) at the University of California, Riverside, was to survey middle- and high-school students and conduct focus groups with students and teachers to understand their existing access to civic learning. These data are now collected yearly to determine the kinds of learning opportunities available to students and the extent to which their schools are responsive to their concerns.

Building off of what the data have shown, the district has provided teachers with professional development and support to help them design civic learning projects for their students. In 2020, RUSD was accepted as a model action civics site through Mikva Challenge (Mikva), an organization supplying teachers across the country with action civics youth leadership curriculum materials and professional development resources. In their work with Mikva, RUSD teachers implemented the Project Soapbox curriculum, through which students identify, research, and present issues that affect them and their communities.

With increasing support for this initiative, and in alignment with the district's "world ready" graduation standard, the school board in 2019 adopted civic engagement as a priority, thereby making a public commitment to ensuring that all Riverside students have access to high-quality civic learning. The district's History Social Science (HSS) Specialist has also developed a district-wide civic engagement plan to scale K–12 civic education programs across all schools in RUSD.

SSCE Year 1

The decision to become an early adopter of the State Seal of Civic Engagement (SSCE) initiative was a natural step for RUSD. The school board voted unanimously²⁴ to adopt the program, and one school board member voiced the hope that as many students as possible would ultimately elect to pursue the SSCE. The district-wide work that was already underway at that time—from the mission statement, to the school board priority, to the leadership of the district's HSS Specialist—provided a foundation from which the SSCE could be integrated into schools across the district. However, a good deal of planning and preparation would still be needed for an effective roll out the program. RUSD viewed the 2020–2021 year as a pilot year, wherein they could implement the SSCE at a select number high schools in the district to learn important lessons for scaling it more broadly.

The first step undertaken by the district was to convene a stakeholder committee comprising district staff, teachers, community partners (including a city council representative), and students from each high school. The committee met monthly from January to May 2021 to learn about the SSCE, determine district criteria, align the SSCE to district goals, and develop school-specific plans for implementation. Each school site team created an implementation plan according to the following outline:

- **Who should be part of the implementation team?**
- **What civic learning experiences already exist to support students in earning the SSCE?**
- **What are the opportunity gaps preventing all students to be able to earn the SSCE?**
- **What are the necessary action steps to roll out the SSCE at our school?**

While the first year was considered a pilot, everyone was thrilled by the fact that 109 students were awarded the SSCE. In school year 2021–2022, RUSD will focus on increasing the number of recipients and working toward the goal of providing all students with opportunities to engage in a broad range of civic learning experiences throughout their time in RUSD schools.

Promising Approaches

One of the approaches that enabled RUSD to leverage the SSCE as a tool to further deepen the civic learning efforts in the district was the district's five-year district-wide civic engagement plan.²⁵ The plan helped to articulate RUSD's civic values and vision, create district coherence, and situate the SSCE within a broader objective of democratic education. As stated in the plan, "Riverside Unified School District seeks to foster a culture of civic-mindedness by providing students the opportunities—inside

and outside the classroom—to develop the civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to be actively engaged in a democratic 21st-century society.”

Several promising approaches surfaced from the work performed at RUSD’s various pilot-year sites. For instance, at one of the smaller high schools—where fewer enrollees meant that teachers could more easily reach all students—an informed civic engagement project was incorporated into the 11th-grade English language arts (ELA) coursework. Each student was tasked with identifying and researching an issue they cared about, interviewing at least two people to gather further information, writing and presenting a soapbox speech on the topic, creating a documentary about the issue, writing a research paper that included a plan of action, and finally putting some part of their plan into action. (For examples of student projects, see the section titled “Students’ Perspectives Of and Experiences With the SSCE.”) Students will continue to work on the action components of their projects next year in their 12th-grade ELA courses. At this same school, the ninth-grade ELA teacher is working on integrating real-world civic learning projects into the curriculum. By exposing students to civic learning at an earlier grade, they have the opportunity to build their civic knowledge, skills, and capacities throughout their time in high school, and in a range of ways, instead of only a single experience at the end of 12th-grade.

One of the comprehensive high schools in the district is also aiming to reach all students, but as a larger school, the task is clearly more complex. A team of HSS, ELA, and Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID)²⁶ teachers are working together to integrate civic learning into both the core curriculum and extracurricular activities. The team also sought out courses and programs already in place at the school that could be enhanced by integrating a civic component. For example, they identified environmental science and engineering curricula containing a number of civic issues, and they will work to connect with colleagues in these subject areas. They also plan to build off of a longstanding oral history project with veterans in the community, adding an action component for students who wish to earn the SSCE. By identifying a range of pathways, from coursework to student clubs, the team at this large school site is hoping to make the SSCE accessible to all students.

Challenges Faced

Moving the SSCE forward in a large district like RUSD does come with some challenges. While coherence and coordination at the district level was key, supporting each school site to develop a team and a plan to fit their specific context was equally important. The district’s HSS Specialist encouraged school-site teams to build their own advisory groups composed of students, teachers, school administrators, stakeholders, community partners, and families, who could help to evaluate students’ applications and eligibility for the SSCE as the number of applications increase. One teacher noted the need for funds and resources to establish a point person at each school site who can coordinate the various components of the program, especially as interest in the SSCE grows. For these reasons, the HSS Specialist has begun developing a toolkit²⁷ to support school sites as they develop systems and structures to support student attainment of the SSCE.

“*The action part is sometimes challenging. My students said that ... they felt like there wasn't enough time to actually do the action part.*”



Another challenge to surface in the district's pilot year was the discovery that students needed more time and support to complete their civic engagement projects. As one teacher shared,

The action part is sometimes challenging. My students said that ... they felt like there wasn't enough time to actually do the action part. For next year we're going to start it a lot earlier, actually doing the action part. ... And finding places and where students can actually feel like they got involved and that they did something.

This teacher also mentioned a desire to create opportunities for multiyear civic engagement projects, to allow students' civic experiences to evolve naturally over time, across multiple grade levels.

One teacher spoke to the possibility of tensions arising during the course of working on civic engagement projects. She mentioned that as students are encouraged to assert themselves and share perspectives on the issues that matter to them, some adults may be made uncomfortable. Further, such work could result in challenges in the classroom, among students who disagree with one another about contentious issues and for teachers who will have to mediate the conflict. While this teacher had not had such an experience herself—indicating she had done a lot of work with her students up front to establish guidelines around civil discourse and that students were very respectful of one another—she did still hope that a rollout of the SSCE program would encourage her school and the district to more clearly define what civic engagement is and to lay the groundwork for what constitutes an informed and productive project. She continued, imparting some of the things that were important to her:

To do the project, you're going to have to do some sourcing and some research—and they have to be ... acceptable resources. Where are you getting your information from? What are you talking about when it comes to civic engagement? It's not just standing in front of the school and screaming, "I hate whatever it is." Right? That's not civic engagement without it being informed action ... And I think that's where the rubric of sorts might come into play.

During the end-of-year meeting with the district stakeholder committee, a number of teachers echoed this hope to come together as a district to establish foundational criteria and indicators for high-quality civic engagement projects.

Supports and Enabling Conditions

One asset readily available to RUSD is their partnership with Mikva. With a series of robust curricula and professional development resources, Mikva aids teachers in devising informed action projects and fostering respectful and effective discussion and deliberation in the classroom. Such support structures will be invaluable in helping the district roll out the SSCE and build teacher capacity in the area of civic learning. In addition, the Riverside County Office of Education has been a key support to the district as well as intermediaries that aid in the promotion of student voice and civic learning in the region.

Another key resource has been a multiyear partnership with CERG, based at the University of California, Riverside. Through the support of the John Randolph Haynes Foundation, CERG has served as a thought partner and has assisted RUSD in their efforts to establish a systemic commitment to advance civic and democratic learning. CERG worked with RUSD to administer annual student surveys and student focus groups that explore students' civic learning experiences and other civic outcomes. This has enabled RUSD to assess the distribution of civic learning experiences across the district and examine the quality of students' experiences. To support reflection and discussion of the results, CERG creates individual school reports highlighting the civic data from student surveys and provides the district with findings about the distribution of a range of civic learning opportunities and outcomes with respect to student race/ethnicity, family socioeconomic status, and student academic performance. By drawing on local data as well as best practices from national research, CERG assists RUSD to identify goals, conceptualize indicators for success, reflect on progress, and refine their strategic plans.

A third source of support for RUSD came through the Center for Social Innovation (CSI), also based at University of California, Riverside. CSI integrates researchers, community organizations, and civic stakeholders in collaborative projects and long-term partnerships that strengthen shared values of resilience, inclusion, sustainability, and equity in the Inland Empire—the Southern California region in which RUSD is located. One staff member from CSI served as a member of the district’s SSCE stakeholder committee, and a RUSD teacher worked with CSI to identify community organizations and civic leaders in the region that focused on civic engagement issues of interest to students. Next year, CSI will help to match students with organizations in the area and build a bridge between the school and the community.

One CSI staff member expressed a wish to see the SSCE become a pathway for young people to become more civically engaged and “understand that civic engagement is a really important component of the overall life of our community and the wellbeing of our community.” He also highlighted the initiative’s great potential to create a meaningful collaboration between school districts and schools and local government, civic infrastructure, and community nonprofit organizations. His hope is that the SSCE will help school districts to:

be mindful of the importance of civic infrastructure and civic engagement. And then for nonprofits in return to look at this initiative and be like, “Hey, this is our chance to continue to center student voices, to continue to provide them opportunities—to essentially just start retooling and start prepping and advancing the next generation of leaders.”

Looking Ahead

The stakeholder committee convened for the final time at the end of the 2020–2021 school year to celebrate the fact that 109 students from RUSD earned the SSCE and to reflect on the progress made in the program’s pilot year. The district’s HSS Specialist described the process as messy, yet productive. A teacher in the stakeholder group shared that the committee had been helpful in communicating ideas and promising practices across sites. There was a desire among teachers to streamline and clarify the criteria moving forward, as well as to develop common rubrics so that teachers could build a consistent understanding across schools in RUSD, particularly for the informed civic engagement project as outlined in the California Department of Education’s SSCE Criteria 3. The committee grappled with determining what constitutes a high-quality civic engagement project, how they will define action, how to support both flexibility and consistency at the same time, and where civic engagement projects can easily fit into the curriculum.

Summary

RUSD’s district-wide commitment and multiyear efforts to promote civic learning in its schools enabled them to roll out the SSCE in a meaningful way, even in spite of the hurdles they encountered in their pilot year. Involving a range of stakeholders in the process helped to build momentum and excitement about the SSCE in the district, at school sites, and in the community. Moving forward, RUSD will continue to work on strengthening district cohesion and coordination around the initiative while also allowing space for flexibility at individual school sites.

Endnotes:

²⁴ https://www.riversideunified.org/our_district/r_u_s_d_news/r_u_s_d_adopts_civic_engagement_resolution

²⁵ https://drive.google.com/file/d/1PdTcY1SpGRi7Rv7bKQn3Sr_HmasTedoA/view?usp=sharing

²⁶ An in-school academic support program for Grades 7–12; <https://www.avid.org/>

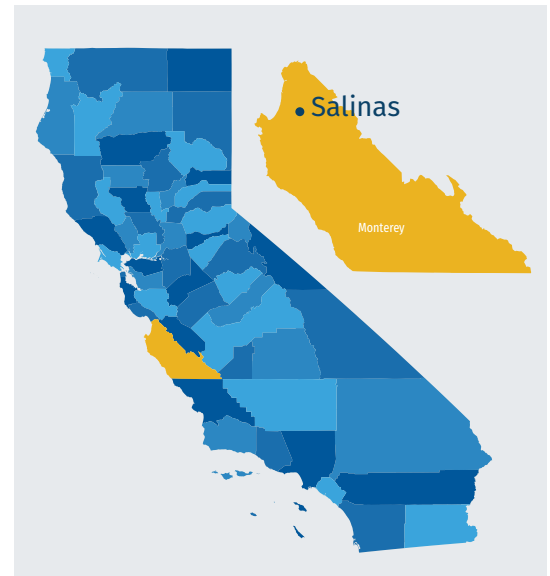
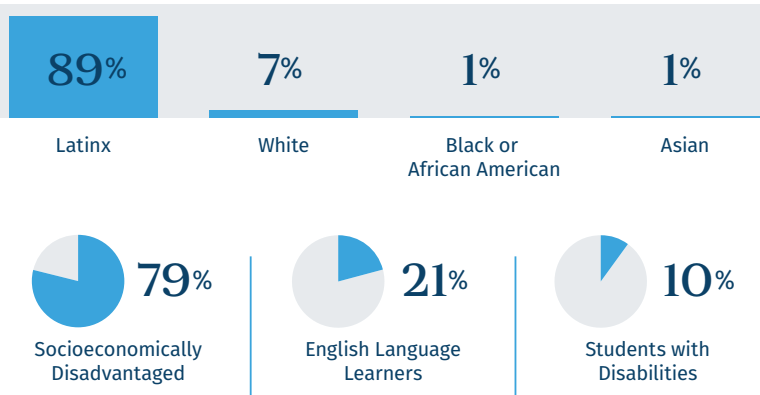
²⁷ <https://sites.google.com/riversideunified.org/rusdcivics/state-seal-of-civic-engagement?authuser=0>

Early Adopter Profile

Salinas Union High School District

DISTRICT FACTS

Total Population **16,257**



Data Source: California Department of Education, California School Dashboard, 2019-2020

“ I hope to see students become empowered. By putting this carrot of a state seal in front of their faces and forcing them to get out into the community, learn about the issues and play some role in addressing those issues, they can start to understand that, ‘I’m a member of this community, but I’m not trapped by it. I can change it if I want to. I’m capable of doing that, understanding that the state says that I can do that. And in fact, the state encourages me to do that,’ I think will go a long way and empowering the young people in this community.” — Student Leader

Salinas Union High School District (SUHSD) is one of the largest high school districts in Northern California. It currently serves 16,000 students in Grades 7–12 across 12 school sites and another 2,000 adult students at an adult education center. A number of very promising structures exist to support civic learning in the district: Over the course of the 2019–2020 school year, the History Social Studies (HSS) Curriculum Specialist supported a group of teacher leaders from a range of schools in the district in creating a district-wide civics framework outlining the civic knowledge/awareness, civic skills/competencies, and civic values/dispositions that all of SUHSD should develop. In addition, teachers in the cohort also codeveloped civic learning unit plans that could be shared with colleagues and lifted up as model examples. Further, a cohort of teachers across the district had the chance to participate in professional development seminars on civic online reasoning that was facilitated by

the Stanford History Education Group, where they developed lessons that are now available online. Finally, to support their civic efforts, SUHSD has built strong partnerships with the Monterey County Office of Education (MCOE), the University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC) History and Civics Project, the Civic Engagement Research Group (CERG), and Mikva Challenge (Mikva).

For the 2020–2021 school year, SUHSD also rolled out an Introduction to Ethnic Studies course at all sites across the district, with core components of civic learning integrated throughout its curriculum. Additional opportunities for civic learning are also being explored and developed by teachers in other subject areas such as science, world languages, and culture. Finally, teachers throughout the districts have begun integrating projects that resemble action civics and citizen science into their coursework.

SUHSD was very well positioned to adopt the State Seal of Civic Engagement (SSCE) initiative and to recognize students for their civic engagement and involvement in the community. The spirit of the SSCE aligns with a long history of civic engagement in the Salinas community, where other civic learning efforts have enjoyed widespread support. As one parent shared during a community listening tour event in the summer of 2020,

I think [civic education] is the most important thing for youth. And how do I see it in schools? I don't see it. I see it in clubs, but I don't see all of the children in clubs. For me, civic education should happen at various levels and across relationships.

A range of attendees at the event—including students, teachers, school leaders, families, and community partners—emphasized the importance of civic learning, expressing a desire for it to be offered more frequently and equitably to all students.

SSCE Year 1

Because district leaders wanted to ensure that the SSCE was rolled out in a way that would be accessible and inclusive to all students, they did not confer any insignia to students in Year 1 but instead focused on planning and preparation, taking a slower approach to lay the groundwork for a full roll out in the 2021–2022 school year. To begin, the HSS Curriculum Specialist convened a committee of 25 different stakeholders, which included students from across the district high schools, teachers, school leaders, parents, and community members. The committee met periodically over the course of the school year, with the first few meetings focused on cultivating a collective vision that would amplify student voice and civic learning in the district and that didn't limit the conversation to simply the mechanics of rolling out the SSCE. The HSS Curriculum Specialist shared about his experience of the process:

“ *I think it's been some of the most rewarding kind of work I've done in my career ... So, we started with the aspirational—we started with the vision setting.”*



I think it's been some of the most rewarding kind of work I've done in my career ... So, we started with the aspirational—we started with the vision setting. We started with the “why” versus the “how,” and we had to intentionally do that, because a lot of the questions surrounding the [SSCE]—or civic work in general—[focus on] “how,” but I think it really helped us kind of set an intention that guided the rest of what we talked about.

This positive experience was echoed by students, a community member, and a parent we interviewed, all of whom had participated in the committee. In particular, respondents were energized and inspired by the youth who had participated, and the passion and energy they contributed.

Toward the second half of the year, members of the committee joined a group of HSS teachers who had been involved in a SUHSD civics pilot program to develop a Civic Learning Plan for 2021-2024,²⁸ which reflects their vision and recommendations for promoting the effective and equitable integration of civic education across all grade levels and subject areas, including the implementation of the SSCE. The needs identified in this plan center around curriculum, professional development, site- and district-specific decision making, and community partnerships. These needs, as well as action steps that can be taken to attend to each need, were intentionally aligned to the SUHSD local control accountability plan (LCAP) goals in order to ensure coherence with the aims of the broader district. The school board approved the plan in the summer of 2021 and also integrated it into the district's LCAP, noting:

In order to graduate College, Career, and Community ready students, our district will implement a Civic Engagement Plan. Our plan will provide opportunities and secure resources so that students have multiple pathways toward meeting and exceeding state criteria for the Seal of Civic Engagement, pursuant to CA Assembly Bill 24, which calls pupils “to become civically engaged in democratic governmental institutions at the local, state, and national levels.” School site and district staff will coordinate to provide our students with opportunities within the district instructional program, within the Salinas communities, as well as the wide state and national level.²⁹

With this commitment, the district paved the way for the implementation of their civic engagement goals beginning with the 2021–2022 school year.

Promising Approaches

Among the notable promising approaches taken by SUHSD was a prioritization of student voice within the planning process, as well as an intention to continue to include students in the process of shaping the work moving forward. As noted above, eight students from a range of district high schools participated in the stakeholder committee. One participating 12th-grade student shared that he was “blown away by the diversity of voices and experiences on the committee.” He appreciated that the HSS Curriculum Specialist had prepared background materials for the students ahead of time, so they could understand the context of the group and the process they were embarking on. He also noted the effort made to elevate student voices in intentional ways throughout the meeting, as well as the opportunities for small group discussions where he felt more comfortable voicing his ideas and perspectives, including one instance where students joined a breakout group on their own to talk with one another.

Despite the committee's efforts to recruit and amplify a diverse group of students, some initial tensions arose as adult voices tended to dominate the space. Another 12th-grade student described his early experience:

I felt there was a preference for adult voices, rather than student voices. For one, it was still a Seal of Civic

Engagement for students, but there were ... 20 adults, five students—it didn't make sense. I don't know why there's always a preference for adult voices.

In their second meeting, the committee reflected on the places where authentic student voice was happening in SUHSD. The group then reflected on a spectrum of student voice, highlighting ways they could move from simply offering students the opportunity to express themselves toward fostering deeper and more meaningful student partnerships and, ultimately, to establishing student leadership.³⁰ The group then reflected on the conditions that would need to exist in order for student voice to move toward authentic leadership, as well as the barriers, bright spots, and needs of such an effort. These ideas were revisited throughout the remainder of the committee meetings, where the following guiding questions were used to help adult members to be responsive and attentive to student voice:

- **Are we ready to listen? ¿Estamos listos para escuchar bien?**
- **What would it look like or mean for our district if every student earned this Seal? ¿Cómo se vería o significaría para nuestro distrito si todos los estudiantes obtuvieran este Sello?**
- **What does this look like IN ACTION? ¿Cómo se ve esto EN ACCIÓN?**

A second student we interviewed noted a real shift in subsequent committee meetings and that, over time, he felt that student voices truly were desired in the space.

A community leader who participated in the committee and who works with youth in the community shared that to really support adults in listening to youth requires working with adults at all levels of the system, as well as tools and resources.

I think that there is going to be some tension when looking at civic engagement—if the district isn't modeling it in its practices and its policy, then there can be some challenges there. I think then just being prepared to have those conversations, that it's not about "us versus you," it's about a system that was created way before any of us were around, so it should be adapting ... It should be reflective of the community needs as time goes.

Thus, in addition to pledging a commitment to student voice, local education agencies (LEAs) must develop systems and structures to effect change as well as take action to build adults' capacities for centering youth voice by responding to and giving it equal weight. Without such deliberate efforts, the risk remains of tokenizing student voices and alienating youth from meaningful and authentic participation.

Another promising approach by SUHSD is the emphasis on bridging civic engagement efforts and the roll out of ethnic studies. SUHSD was the first public school district in the county to pass an ethnic studies requirement, and the semester course requirement was passed by the SUHSD school board in March of 2019. The HSS Curriculum Specialist, who is heading up the ethnic studies curricular work as well as the district's civic learning efforts, explained that the ethnic studies pedagogy incorporates:

a critically informed taking-action stance, where students are encouraged and supported in identifying not only who they are and how everything, including school, impacts the multiple identities that these students have and their lived experiences, ... but often there's a real intentional action component within ethnic studies courses. So, whether that's teachers engaging students in youth participatory action research projects, or action civics. So there's a natural integration, in my mind, of this work with ethnic studies programming, especially the one that we're trying to develop.

One teacher who participated in the SUHSD civics pilot program shared the myriad ways in which students respond to courses such as civics and ethnic studies, describing how her students:

want to explore and discuss who they are, what they think about the world, and what their part is in that world. They are really engaged, care deeply about issues, and want to make a difference. Civic education, along with ethnic studies, are powerful avenues to do just that.

Other stakeholders we interviewed agreed with this sentiment. One parent who participated in the stakeholder committee offered her perspective on the value of ethnic studies and the civic components of the course. As her daughter attended class remotely from home during her school's distance learning period, the parent noted her amazement at how the teacher encouraged students to engage with and participate in the community and society around them. She recounted that, after taking this class, her daughter is now interested in watching the news, asks complex questions about current events, and talks at the dinner table about issues that matter to her. "That's what civic engagement is to me ... It's like, being a critical thinker before you just follow the crowd, and then also being a critical thinker to think about how you can influence your community."

“ That's what civic engagement is to me ... It's like, being a critical thinker before you just follow the crowd, and then also being a critical thinker to think about how you can influence your community.”

When asked whether schools should play a role in helping young people understand civic and political issues, this parent responded by explaining that she doesn't think it's fair or responsible to wait until students turn 18 years old and are eligible to vote to teach them to think critically about issues:

Unless we're trying to silence people, why wouldn't we want them to start having [opinions] and being aware, thinking, and questioning right from the start? I don't know. I think that makes people afraid because they might not be in power anymore. And so that's threatening to people—and historically, these groups of people have not been able to have a voice, and I've had all the voice. Well, who says that's not right to have it in school? Is it not right to have it in school because you don't agree with it?

Her advice for other parents was to think about the deep and thoughtful conversations that can result from children becoming more engaged and informed. She talked about how proud she is of her kids for asking hard questions and expressing their own perspectives and ideas in reasoned ways, regardless of whether they align with her views or those of her husband.

Challenges Faced

Despite the widespread support for civic learning, student voice, and ethnic studies in the Salinas community, some adults did present concerns to the school board. At the height of the period of hyperpolarization and misinterpretations around Critical Race Theory during the summer of 2021, a group of parents attended a school board meeting where a vote was being held to refine the ethnic studies program to better emphasize local histories and the history of the ethnic studies movement. These parents argued that the course created division and anger and was a form of political indoctrination. At the next school board meeting, however, a number of parents, students, and community members supportive of the ethnic studies program attended and offered their perspectives on the importance of learning an accurate history, even when it contains challenging topics. In the face of this push back, district leaders engaged in conversation with students, families, and community members to share accurate information about the ethnic studies curriculum and civic learning efforts in the district, in an effort to clarify misconceptions, assuage concerns, and move forward with the work central to the mission of the district: to “provide a comprehensive and rigorous learning experience that prepares students academically, socially and emotionally to be productive citizens in a global society.”

Across the country, including in the Salinas area, school board meetings have become a stage where contentious national and local politics are played out, from reopening schools, to mask mandates, to teaching about race and other controversial topics. Whereas historically, school board meetings have primarily been forums for the resolution of business issues related to the functioning of districts and schools, they have increasingly become a space where community members push to have a voice and debate controversial and complex issues. However, in these instances, healthy democratic norms and civil discourse guidelines are often disregarded. Making room for student voices in such a space is critical, but to do so is a complex undertaking. Crucially, district and school leaders must determine how to promote and protect democratic systems and structures, as well as student voice, in the face of chaos.

Supports and Enabling Conditions

One important source of support for the implementation of SUHSD's focus on civic learning was a collaboration between the district and community partners. The HSS Curriculum Specialist met with a number of community groups and invited leaders to participate in the stakeholder committee. Ultimately, committee members included representatives from the Central Coast YMCA Youth and Government, La Cosecha, Building Healthy Communities (BHC) East Salinas, the UCSC History and Civics Project, and CERG. According to the SUHSD HSS Curriculum Specialist, community collaboration was integral to school district efforts:

I think it reminds people in the education world that students live and learn in community as well, right? And the schools are part of the community. So, I really think any successful civic venture has to start with youth and community first.

Further, he recommended that all LEAs tap into and partner with allies in the community to expand schools' civic learning and engagement efforts locally. One of the students we interviewed echoed this belief, sharing with us that students need mentors both in schools and in the community to build civic knowledge, skills, and capacities and to help them realize their capacity to make a difference. He noted that the more engaged teachers are in their community, the better guidance they have to offer to their students.

One of the community leaders who participated on the committee described the rich work being done by La Cosecha, based out of BHC East Salinas, with area youth to build civic and political knowledge, engage them in participatory action research, teach them about tactics and strategies to create change, and support their efforts to participate in school board meetings and district budget processes. In addition to partnering with local Salinas-area groups like the YMCA and BHC, SUHSD also collaborated with leaders in MCOE and drew on their support for youth civic engagement in the region. The important role of community partners in fostering civic education is highlighted in the SSCE implementation guidance³¹ provided by the California Department of Education. As LEAs think about how best to introduce the SSCE into their schools and bolster civic learning in their communities, the participation of a range of stakeholders will be critical to their success.

Looking Ahead

The Civic Learning Plan outlined by the stakeholder committee includes a range of recommendations for support, from professional development to school site coordinators, to organize efforts at each high school in the coming school year. SUHSD will be partnering with Mikva, a civic organization whose mission is to develop young people to be informed, active and empowered citizens who promote a just and equitable world. Throughout a three-year partnership with the district, Mikva

will provide SUHSD with professional learning resources, action civics curricula, assistance with collaborative planning and implementation of youth civic action events, and classroom coaching and strategic planning guides. This partnership with Mikva will help to scale high-quality civic learning (aligned to the SSCE criteria) at every SUSHD campus, so that students across the district receive the pathways to learn and engage civically in their communities.

SUHSD will also continue to work with a range of other collaborators, such as the UCSC History and Civics Project, BHC, local community-based organizations, and local government; these partnerships, formal and informal, will be essential to fostering a rich ecosystem of civic engagement for youth. In collaboration with CERG, SUHSD will launch an evaluation plan alongside their civic learning efforts that will allow them to analyze local data focused on civic learning, reflect on progress, engage in evidence-based deliberation, and adjust their plans to meet the needs of students and the district over time. The district's Civic Learning Plan outlines a need for instituting meaningful qualitative as well as quantitative data collection and monitoring, to ensure equity and continued growth of authentic civic learning for all students. SUHSD and CERG will work together to develop a district-wide annual survey assessing the frequency, quality, equitable distribution, and outcomes of civic learning for students, and facilitate annual stakeholder focus groups and/or listening sessions. The fact that this evaluative element is integrated into their plan means that SUHSD will be better poised to determine the extent to which they are meeting their goals as the initiative unfolds.

Summary

In Year 1, SUHSD focused on laying the groundwork for the district to make a deep commitment to civic learning alongside adoption of the SSCE. The Civic Learning Plan developed by the district stakeholder committee helps to actualize this commitment in a set of goals and action steps. In addition, the voices included in the committee, as well as the thoughtful process they undertook, helped to ensure that students, as well as parents, community members, teacher leaders, and school administrators, had an active role in shaping the plan. The SUHSD plan also paves the way for integrating civic learning opportunities into the core curriculum, offering professional learning and support to teachers, and connecting schools and communities. As SUHSD rolls out the SSCE to students in the 2021–2022 school year, these foundational pieces will support a robust phase of implementation.

Endnotes:

²⁸ <https://sites.google.com/salinasuhd.org/historysocialstudies/home>

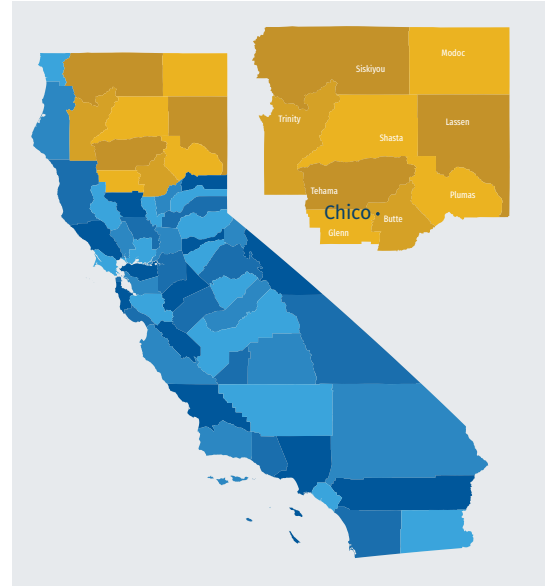
²⁹ <https://www.salinasuhd.org/Page/214>

³⁰ Toshalis, E., & Nakkula, M. (2012). *Motivation, engagement, and student voice: The Students at the Center Series*. Jobs for the Future. <http://www.studentsatthecenterhub.org/resource/motivation-engagement-and-student-voice>

³¹ <https://www.cde.ca.gov/pd/ca/hs/hssstateseal.asp>

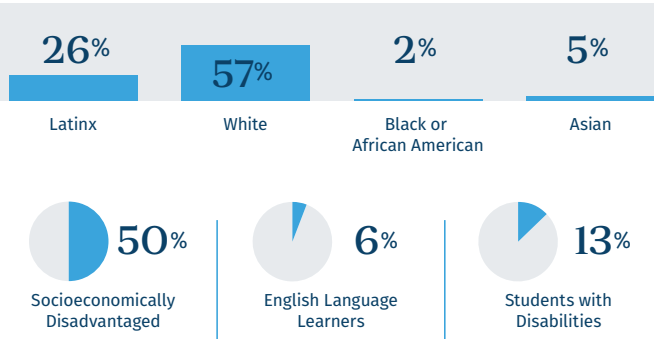
Early Adopter Profile

The Shasta Region (Chico Unified School District and a Shasta County Public Charter School)



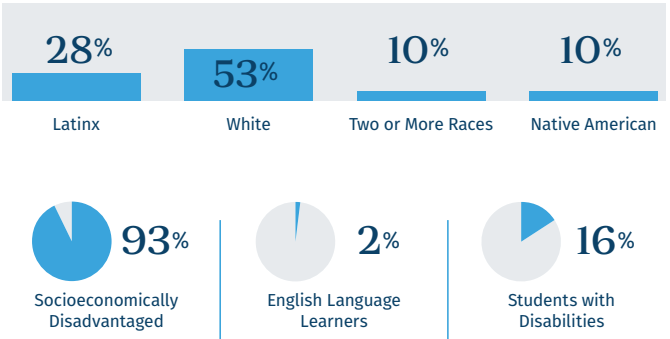
DISTRICT FACTS FOR CHICO UNIFIED

Total Population **12,362**



SCHOOL FACTS FOR A SHASTA COUNTY PUBLIC CHARTER

Total Population **83**



Data Source: California Department of Education, California School Dashboard, 2019-2020

“ When the Seal was approved, it really helped. We needed some accountability for it to be important: If it wasn't something they could earn and it was just a buzzword, then it wouldn't have happened.”

—County Leader

In this profile, we highlight a variety of efforts to promote the State Seal of Civic Engagement (SSCE) in several schools and districts in Region 2 (often called the Shasta region) of northeastern California, an area that includes Butte, Glenn, Lassen, Modoc, Plumas, Shasta, Siskiyou, Tehama, and Trinity counties. The Shasta region is a large, mostly rural, and sparsely populated area. The lessons learned and the challenges encountered by SSCE early adopters in this region help to contextualize how the SSCE is being implemented in various contexts in the state. This profile focuses on SSCE rollout at a school in Chico Unified School District and at a public charter school in Redding.

The approval of the SSCE by the California State Board of Education (SBE) helped to pave the way for educators to attend to civic learning through a tangible initiative. This seemed to be particularly true in the far northern part of the state, which is more politically conservative than other areas of California. In our interviews, participants explained how civics is often seen as a “lefty thing to do.” They talked about the need to explain the nonpartisan nature of civic learning. The SBE’s support of the SSCE also helped to emphasize the importance of integrating civic learning into the curriculum beyond the typical semester-long government course in 12th grade. One county leader shared how “when the [SSCE] was approved, it really helped. We needed some accountability for it to be important: If it wasn’t something they could earn and it was just a buzzword then it wouldn’t have happened.”

In this region, educational initiatives of this nature are often best rolled out in a collaborative manner across counties and local education agencies (LEAs), in order to pool resources and support. For instance, during the 2020–2021 school year the project lead for Content, Literacy, Inquiry, and Citizenship (CLIC) in Region 2, based out of the Glenn County Office of Education, spearheaded a virtual professional development series for 25 teachers called “Preparing for the Seal of Civic Engagement.” The series focused on exploring the meaning of civic engagement, learning about promising practices in civic education, understanding the SSCE, and beginning to develop local criteria for the SSCE. Toward the end of the series, participants were asked to present their plans to their administration and department, to gather feedback and increase buy-in. Although none of the participating districts planned to roll out the SSCE in the 2020–2021 school year, a few of the LEAs do intend to do so in 2021–2022. That being said, with limited resources and capacity, it will take time to put the plans in place and build support to launch the SSCE.

Cathy,³² the Region 2 project lead, emphasized how valuable it was for teachers at the professional development series to engage in discussion with their colleagues. In Region 2, secondary-level History Social Science (HSS) teachers are often the only individuals in their districts to teach this subject area, and as such they frequently don’t have opportunities for collaboration or to codesign and develop curriculum. Thus, the availability of high-quality curricular resources is critical, particularly for individuals who prepare for and teach multiple subject areas and grade levels. In addition, a lack of funding has meant that many schools are teaching outdated curricula from the 1990s. Therefore, when considering a roll out of a new civic education initiative in such contexts, it will be important to consider how to provide up-to-date, cohesive, and high-quality curriculum resources, as well as opportunities for professional development and collaboration.

Aligning educational objectives across elementary, middle, and high schools can also be a challenge in this region. Guidance from the California Department of Education (CDE) encourages LEAs to consider ways to recognize and celebrate civic learning both locally and regionally and at a range of grade levels. As Cathy explained,

I will say it's hard, because we say things like, "We'll work with your feeder district." Well, the way that things work around here is we have a ton of K–8s. So, how ... does a high school teacher then work with the six feeder schools to make some vertical alignment? ... I think in a big district that's a better model, but here, it just doesn't work, because you could be [traveling] an hour to get to all teachers.

In order to think about a K–12 pathway for civic learning, it is important to find ways for schools to collaborate with one another, so that students have opportunities to learn about participating in community and society before the 12th grade. Just as with other subject areas, students can better deepen their knowledge and skills when allowed to engage in increasingly complex and varied civic learning opportunities over time. When the Region 2 professional development series was moved online in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers reported that the remote format was much more accessible and convenient for them than meeting in person. As such, it may be helpful for rural areas to consider a permanent shift to online professional learning and collaboration even beyond the pandemic.

Finally, the availability of community resources and support for civic learning are particularly important in rural regions of the state. According to Cathy, “Many examples that are often out there, about partnering with your local YMCA, just [don’t] work in a rural context where there aren’t organizations like that here.” Rural areas are often the site of what researchers call a “civic desert”—that is, a community without many opportunities for civic engagement. Studies have found that civic deserts are increasingly common in the United States as the numbers of civic institutions such as places of worship, unions, regional newspapers, and local political organizations have declined.³³ As a result, schools must now draw on communities in other ways, such as by collaborating with parents and families or offering online civic engagement opportunities, to support and promote youth civic engagement.

SSCE Year 1

Chico Unified School District. One of the school districts to pursue adoption of the SSCE in Region 2 was the Chico Unified School District (CUSD). One of the most populous cities in the region, Chico grew significantly after wildfires in 2018 decimated smaller towns nearby. This school district now encompasses a total of 18 schools, with more than 12,000 students.

Melissa, a teacher at a CUSD high school, described her school’s efforts to roll out the SSCE. This school had been recognized with a civic learning award in 2019. Given the existing focus on civic learning, Melissa looked forward to working with colleagues at her school and across the district to implement the SSCE in the 2021–2022 school year. CUSD’s plan focuses on rolling out the SSCE in 11th- and 12th-grade HSS and English language arts (ELA) courses. In an effort to ensure that the SSCE is accessible to all students, they also plan to develop common lesson plans centered on civic learning and the SSCE that can be taught by all teachers in Grades 11 and 12 in the first week or two of the school year.

As the department chair, I can kind of put a little bit of pressure to say “Hey, we know we have kids moving in and out of classes the first two weeks. This is one way that every student, at least in 11th and 12th grade, has the same instruction for the first week of school.” And that’s going to get buy-in. I know in our lower levels, in our 10th-grade classes, we have a [similar] project and it’s very popular—again, because a kid can go through three teachers in the first four days of school if his schedule changes. So that’s one of my ways that I can guarantee that kids at least get the exposure to it.

Following these common introductory lessons, teachers will then have the option to delve more deeply into civic engagement projects; alternately, students will have the opportunity to earn the SSCE by participating in civic engagement activities in the community or after school. While she hopes that HSS teachers will integrate all aspects of the SSCE into the core curriculum so that every student has access, Melissa understands that it may be challenging for some teachers to give up time and space in their curriculum, especially in semester courses such as Government or Economics, particularly ones that begin in January, which may not provide sufficient time for students to finish before the SSCE deadline.

Shasta County Public Charter. The second teacher leader we spoke with in Region 2 was the HSS teacher at a Shasta County public charter school that provides academic and career training to students aged 16–24 in need of a high school diploma. As a part of the overall curriculum, students here participate in academic, life-skills, and career-development classes as well as leadership-development and community-service activities. Frank was supported by his principal to attend the regional professional development series, as they both believed a civic engagement program at their school would particularly benefit their student population: While students engage with a range of civically oriented programs and community groups—such as AmeriCorps, the Hill County Health and Wellness program, and local Native American tribes—no structured civic learning program is currently in place at the school.

Frank was the only teacher from his school to attend the professional development series; likewise, he is the only HSS teacher at his school. However, he hopes to work with both the ELA teacher and the Construction and Woodworking teacher to implement an SSCE initiative there. Similar to other alternative-education programs, students at this school are often in need of extra credits to graduate or to meet general education diploma (GED) requirements, so a course tied to the SSCE is promising. It will be designed as a six-week elective diving into a range of informed civic learning experiences through field trips and engagement opportunities in the area, with particular focus on issues that matter to the students and critical needs of the community. Frank described one proposed project:

We have the Carr fire that went through here—so that made national news—and the Paradise fire ... And so we are offering a lot of these [tiny] homes to people who haven't had their houses built yet. As far as living ... just, living standards are so low right now. They're living out of trailers, living in hotel rooms. And so we can prefabricate these houses and get them out onto their property while they rebuild their homes.

This elective course will be presented for approval by the school board next year, and then piloted in the spring of 2022. Frank hopes to then roll it out fully in the 2022–2023 school year.

Promising Approaches

One promising approach that stood out in our conversations with leaders from this region was the utilization of local funding opportunities. A group of teacher leaders from CUSD, including Melissa, applied for funding from the Northern California Educational Leadership Consortium (NorCal ELC) in order to support their work around the SSCE. NorCal ELC, a partnership between a number of colleges and universities, serves the 11 northernmost counties of California by providing high-quality professional learning and support for school and teacher leaders, including grants. CUSD's grant application was accepted,

and so teachers at the school will receive stipends to meet throughout the school year to develop civic learning curriculum resources. In addition, Melissa is hoping to include two student teachers in the group, which she believes will be a powerful way to set them up to roll out the SSCE at their respective placement schools, thereby increasing the uptake of the SSCE in the area. The group also plans to share the curriculum



“ *Even looking at controversial or potentially hot topics in my room, I feel that I create a space where we can have those conversations, and kids feel like their voices are being heard. They're not being judged; I'm not really seeing it as potentially controversial or anything like that. The whole question we're talking about is, what does it mean to be an American?"*

they develop with teachers from other schools in the area.

Another promising indicator is the focus on student engagement emphasized by both of the Region 2 teachers we interviewed. They were appreciative of the way in which the SSCE recognizes students for their civic and community engagement, and how participation in the project provides ways for them to learn about and become involved with issues that matter to them. Melissa talked about her approach to engaging students and respecting their opinions and perspectives:

I present my classroom very openly and honestly. I encourage free discussion, free thought. We talk about everything in my classroom, so even if someone comes with a way-outside idea, let's examine it at least. And as long as I make it consistent and fair, I've had no issue.

Civic learning can sometimes face pushback when parents or community members believe it to be inherently left leaning. As the Shasta region is more politically conservative than other parts of the state, such concerns have been heightened in recent years as political division and hyperpartisanship have increased. Even so, Melissa described her method of encouraging students to understand the political perspectives of all political parties to then form their own opinions:

Even looking at controversial or potentially hot topics in my room, I feel that I create a space where we can have those conversations, and kids feel like their voices are being heard. They're not being judged; I'm not really seeing it as potentially controversial or anything like that. The whole question we're talking about is, "What does it mean to be an American?" And there's lots of different interpretations of that. I think parents, especially conservative parents, appreciate that.

Regardless of the political leanings of the community, whether liberal, conservative, or mixed, it will be important for teachers and schools across the state to develop classroom norms and practices that support informed and productive discussion and deliberation of civic and political issues, so that young people can learn to talk with one another across political differences.

Challenges Faced

On a similar note, Cathy, the Region 2 project lead, talked about the challenges in her area of an increase in misinformation about civic learning and ethnic studies, which are complementary subjects with many overlaps as students learn about their own identities and their roles in community and society. A lack of understanding and information about these content areas has made it difficult for LEAs to respond to questions, misunderstandings, and backlash from the community. Cathy explained what could be helpful in navigating these issues:

I need clear definitions and examples of what ethnic studies looks like in a rural context, beyond the ethnic studies model curriculum, which is beyond what educators are able to jump right into in this climate ... So, if you decided you would like to get the feel of civic engagement, is ethnic studies a separate thing, or can you merge the two together? And I think what happens is, good intentions, again. We roll out all these things we're excited about, and then we don't ... Nobody can do all of them separately. How can we also combine our messaging around the two and support both of them at the same time?

Thus, while the ethnic studies model curriculum provides LEAs with an educational framework, more is needed to support local implementation of these initiatives. Similarly, while the SBE's approval of the SSCE imparted a level of legitimacy and helped to pave the way for increased civic learning in schools, there remains a need for state-supplied resources such as informational flyers for parents and families, FAQs, curricula, and curriculum materials.

Another challenge noted by Cathy and Region 2 teachers we interviewed was ensuring that the SSCE is accessible and equitable for all students. Making the SSCE accessible was discussed in the region's professional development series; however, many teachers felt it could be difficult and might take time to achieve in their schools. In particular, Cathy shared that many of the teachers who attended the series were Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) teachers, whose plans to integrate civic learning will therefore reach only students in higher-track classes:

I try to say, "How can we make this successful for our students?" But when [mostly AP and IB teachers] are the ones that are there—they're not the ones that have control over whether they can make it more successful or not, because they only see either AP or IB kids. So, it's really the principal or the superintendent of the district who is going to make a program that is sustained. But the problem is, the people that signed up to create the programs were teachers ... Until there is some admin interest, I don't think it's going to be as equitable as it should be, as much as the teachers want it to be. It just can't, because the system isn't set up for that to happen.

Investment by teachers across the school curriculum is critical, so that all students in all classes have access to civic learning. In addition, administrative support is essential to effectively scaling equitable access to civic learning opportunities. While full accessibility and equity may be challenging to achieve, it is even more challenging to strive for over time if it is not prioritized as a goal from the start.

The third challenge that surfaced in the Shasta region, and one related to accessibility and equity, was in determining how to support students to meet the demands of SSCE Criteria 2, which focuses on students demonstrating a competent understanding of United States and California constitutions, local governments, tribal governments, and the role of the citizen in a constitutional democracy. In their guidance, CDE notes that students should complete grade-level HSS course requirements or the equivalent. They also indicate that LEAs "may determine, through local board of education policy, their local definitions of a passing grade," or they may consider other means of demonstrating competency, such as through a content benchmark, a civic assessment, or experiential learning opportunities. The components of Criteria 2 have the potential to create barriers to earning the SSCE for students who struggle academically but are otherwise civically engaged. At the same time, however, the criteria are written to ensure that no student is excluded from an opportunity to earn the SSCE on the basis of academic ability, alternative school settings, or unique or unconventional expressions of civic engagement. Thus, LEAs will have to determine how students can meet the criteria without creating undue barriers. According to Cathy, when teachers attending the professional development series were initially formulating their local districts' SSCE criteria, many had defined a demonstration of Criteria 2 as students having a minimum B grade point average (GPA). Once they shared their criteria with one another and provided feedback, they discussed how a student's GPA is drawn from a range of subjects, not all of which have relevance to a student's civic engagement. Cathy expressed that she thinks LEAs need "to see an example of what an equitable system looks like, because when it comes to the [SSCE], I wouldn't say it's the most equitable model: It's completely based on grades and assessments."

As an alternative, many teachers explored the idea of setting up a portfolio; however, this approach elicited other questions around how to effectively evaluate and support such a format in schools where only one or two teachers are involved in implementing the program. The teachers also explored possibilities such as a constitution test, similar to the one previously administered to students at the eighth-grade level. However, the group grappled with whether this kind of exam actually assesses the sort of civic knowledge at the center of the SSCE initiative, and whether preparing for it could adequately impart the knowledge and skills students need to participate thoughtfully and effectively in our democracy. Cathy explained that teachers at the professional development series were expressing a desire for a civic assessment to determine student outcomes as well as a way to create a sense of accountability for teachers, to ensure that they cover core knowledge. It's possible that some LEAs will create their own versions of such an assessment, but to do so will take time and resources. In

addition, it will be key for LEAs to carefully consider exactly what knowledge is important for students to learn, and then identify a range of ways in which they can demonstrate that understanding, to prevent Criteria 2 from being the only barrier preventing some students from earning the SSCE.

Supports and Enabling Conditions

In this early phase of adopting the SSCE, the most important supportive measure cited by the Region 2 project lead and the teachers we interviewed was having the time and space to plan and prepare, in conversation with others, at the professional development series. This intentional, collaborative environment enabled the teachers to deepen their own understanding of civic learning, consider varied ways to implement the SSCE, and gather innovative ideas and constructive feedback. As we've highlighted, such an opportunity is particularly important in rural areas, where teachers are often isolated from other colleagues who teach the same grade level or content area. When asked what supports would have the most impact going forward, Frank replied, "I think probably my biggest thing is just talking to others who have done it or are a little more ahead of the game than I am. Kind of, it's just me here. So, I am the district." In a number of regions across the state, communities of practice are being brought together through the work of county offices of education and organizations such as the California History Social Science Project and Facing History and Ourselves. Efforts like these can help to facilitate new teachers, schools, and districts in adopting the SSCE. When LEAs move beyond the initial planning and adoption phase, collaboration will continue to be important for practitioners, allowing them to learn from one another on issues like supporting and evaluating high-quality civic engagement projects.

At the same time, it will also be important to consider the extra time and effort that teachers and other school and district staff will need to invest in order to move an SSCE initiative forward. Cathy emphasized how the success of the regional professional development series hinged in part on the availability of funds with which to pay stipends to teachers for participating in the monthly sessions and completing the required independent work in between meetings. Clearly the teachers who participated in the sessions were committed to the initiative and to moving it forward in their local community; however, as this work went above and beyond core responsibilities, it was important to be able to compensate their additional time and effort. Unfortunately, no funding has been allocated by the state to support the implementation of the SSCE. Instead, LEAs can explore opportunities to find funds in the local control funding formula they could allocate for such purposes, as the aims of the SSCE do align with and deepen other academic aims. Such efforts will certainly require a systemic district commitment to be possible: In order to truly ensure that all students have access to high-quality civic learning opportunities—of the sort that will enable them to earn the SSCE—districts will need to invest in and commit to the importance of civic education.

Looking Ahead

As Cathy, Melissa, and Frank looked ahead, they all noted the importance of sharing and learning from the approaches of other LEAs, schools, and teachers in implementing the SSCE. As more LEAs in the state introduce the program in their schools, it will be particularly helpful and generative to have a way to curate and showcase models and examples. In particular, Frank talked about how helpful it would be to see model examples of students' SSCE civic engagement projects. In addition, providing examples of student work across the pre-K-through-12th-grade spectrum is one way to help LEAs envision a robust pathway to civic education, as encouraged by the CDE.

Cathy described the ways in which the regional CLIC Network will continue to integrate attention to the SSCE into their work

as the initiative transitions and evolves beyond the first cycle of funding. This integration of civic learning into ethnic studies, literacy, STEM, and beyond will help to remove barriers to incorporating civic learning across all content areas, and will aid in building a large group of advocates and supporters for this work.

Summary

The efforts to introduce the SSCE in the Shasta region, as described by the county lead and the teachers we interviewed, reveal the different approaches to rolling out the initiative in a variety of contexts. In addition, it illustrates the kinds of constraints and challenges faced by different stakeholders in rural areas of the state, and some possible solutions. Above all, the leaders in this region serve as an inspiration as they commit to integrating civic learning for all students.



Endnotes:

³² Pseudonyms have been used for all participants to provide confidentiality.

³³ Atwell, M. N., Bridgeland, J., and Levine, P. (2017). Civic deserts: America’s civic health challenge. Tufts University, Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life. <https://tischcollege.tufts.edu/research/civic-deserts-americas-civic-health-challenge>

County and Regional Work Promoting the SSCE

“ *Students will be our most effective leaders in this process because it's about empowering them—really igniting their passion for redesigning schools post-pandemic, and determining their role in leading the change. They should be designing their future.*” —MCOE County Leader

Role of County Offices of Education

The introduction of the State Seal of Civic Engagement (SSCE) has renewed interest in and support for civic education by school districts throughout California, and county offices of education are uniquely positioned to bolster these districts' efforts to roll out the program in their schools. From advancing conversations around student voice in school and in district decision-making, to helping to build the capacity of school leaders and teachers around civic learning, county leaders are leveraging the SSCE to expand civic learning and civic engagement opportunities across the state.

One of the most important tasks assumed by county offices of education has been to demonstrate how the SSCE can be integrated with a variety of educational frameworks and subject areas. For example, as part of its Multi-Tiered System of Supports initiative, the Monterey County Office of Education (MCOE) is exploring how frameworks such as Universal Design for Learning and Social Emotional Learning can create opportunities to elevate students' civic voices. For instance, giving students the space and skills to express their emotions around current events, personal and community relationships, and conflict resolution is a way to equip them to engage in productive civil dialogue. As another example, MCOE has provided professional development sessions that explore the connections between science, math, and English language arts with action civics in an effort to boost interdisciplinary literacy.



The goal is to create a range of options that will honor the different contexts and programs across schools but will also keep school districts aligned in terms of providing students with authentic and inquiry-based civic engagement opportunities.

At a recent math festival organized by the county, students had the opportunity to play games tackling fractions, equations, and gerrymandering. In the Glenn County Office of Education (GCOE), some school districts are purchasing new history curriculums for the first time in 20 years. As a result, county leaders are guiding educators toward high-quality curricular options that focus on inquiry and civics as well as training teachers how to apply civic learning to science and math courses.

Meanwhile, the Sacramento County Office of Education (SCOE) is assisting its school districts to consider how their model curriculum for ethnic studies intersects with the goals of the SSCE. As one county leader explained, educators need help to understand what is actually in the curriculum as well as how to engage students in its development and implementation:

Why not have students be on a committee that might be able to contribute to the conversation about what the course is going to look like? Or, how we are going to approach ethnic studies and the greater equity issues that we have throughout our curriculum? It's a perfect opportunity—and, I think, a legitimate opportunity—for students to be involved in that process. It shouldn't be something that is purely the district or school board's decision. It should be influenced by and, at least, advised by students.

By including students in the roll out of ethnic studies programming in schools, SCOE can help school districts become better “consumers and users of that framework,” while also providing students with authentic opportunities to participate in decision-making about their own education.

Another important step taken by county offices of education has been to create content for school districts that may not currently offer the type of instruction required for students to earn the SSCE. For instance, Criterion 1 of the California Department of Education’s (CDE’s) SSCE guidelines³⁴ asks students to demonstrate an understanding of the United States and California constitutions and the structures and organizations of Native American tribal governments. However, students who may apply for the SSCE in 11th grade have not yet covered state constitutions in their social science classes, and many high schools fail to cover tribal governments in any grade. To address this content gap, the Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOEO) created two online, self-paced mini courses³⁵ that will allow students to fulfill the SSCE criteria, regardless of the quality or content of instruction at their school. Although these courses are not yet available to the public, they will be field-tested during the 2021–2022 school year and then offered to students throughout the state.

Common Approaches to the SSCE

As county offices of education build school districts’ capacities to implement the SSCE through interdisciplinary professional development and content creation, a number of common approaches exist to further support this work. First, the boards of education in several counties have adopted resolutions to symbolically demonstrate their endorsement of the SSCE. These resolutions serve as a call to action for school districts to adopt the SSCE and help to signal the increasing importance of civic learning to educators, students, and the community. On a related note, several county offices of education are in the process of adopting the SSCE at the county level, so that students do not have to wait for their individual school districts to adopt the program in order to participate. In doing so, county leaders will have the chance to enable elementary- and middle-school students to earn the SSCE as well.

Second, county offices of education have led the charge on developing websites providing resources to support school districts interested in adopting the SSCE. Many of these websites include examples of school board resolutions, recorded webinars, and guides to creating local criteria for the SSCE. As more school districts award the SSCE to their students, county leaders hope to add examples of student work and assessment rubrics, as well as curricular units and action plans used by school leaders.

Third, county leaders are facilitating both formal and informal communities of practice among educators seeking support to roll out the SSCE in their school districts. LACOE, for example, offers open-invitation conversations over Zoom where participants can work together to develop their local SSCE criteria. In MCOE, county leaders are partnering with local community groups (e.g., Building Healthy Communities, the Yolo County Elections Office) to help promote the SSCE through conference presentations, voter registration events for students, and Law Day. They also plan to expand their outreach to other existing school and community groups, such as the Migrant Education Speech and Debate Competition, Junior State of America, and Youth and Government, so that stakeholders are able to see the pathway that extracurricular activities can play within the SSCE too. On the more formal side, in 2017, SCOE developed a system of statewide and regional communities of practice through the Content, Literacy, Inquiry, and Citizenship (CLIC) Project with funding from the CDE. Participants in the CLIC Project currently receive targeted support for implementing the History-Social Science Framework, and the scope of the initiative will be broadened to include the SSCE over the next year:

The focus next year is really going to be around building out those resources that will show, definitively, that this can happen, and that it can be done in a number of different situations. And, to get to a point, by working with early adopters, where we can see the successes and the pitfalls that some have had. And, ultimately, to be able to come out with some sort of a program or toolkit that a district can look at and not have to create from whole cloth ... The other thing is, it would be great to have a number of different [examples] so that I can point to three or four that might fit your situation, rather than a laundry list of everything that everyone's doing across the state.

Some CLIC communities of practice have already started this work by bringing district superintendents and/or district leaders together to compare and “standardize” local criteria for the SSCE. The goal is to create a range of options that will honor the different contexts and programs across schools but will also keep school districts aligned in terms of providing students with authentic and inquiry-based civic engagement opportunities. According to one county leader in GCOE, they have already experienced early success within their learning networks by devising a common definition of civic engagement and creating local indicators for school districts. Participants in this county are currently reporting back to their school- or district-site administrators to get feedback and plan for next steps.

Common Challenges

While county offices of education are making headway with implementation of the SSCE, the process has not been without its challenges. When the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated a shutdown of schools across California, some county and district leaders were forced to shift priorities away from civic education. Luckily, many early adopters of the SSCE opted to forge ahead, albeit at a slower pace than they had initially anticipated. For those school districts just getting started with adopting the SSCE when the shutdowns occurred, many were “conceptually on board” but experienced pressure from trying to implement a new initiative during such a “chaotic year.” As a result, county offices of education have reported that some schools are taking on the SSCE as an individual site initiative at this point, rather than a district initiative.

The increased polarization around teaching about issues of racism and inequity has also created challenges for county leaders supporting the implementation of the SSCE in their schools. Although California has not passed legislation banning controversial discussions in schools, as has been done in some other states, educators are wary of pushback in more politically conservative school districts, where community members may associate civic education with left-leaning politics. As such, county leaders are creating resources to help educators communicate the purpose and goals of civic learning as well as the SSCE in understandable, nonpartisan terms for students and families in their districts.

Relatedly, county leaders have noticed some educators struggling to recognize issues of inequity in their proposed plans for implementing the SSCE. Part of this stems from educators' tendency to equate the SSCE with the State Seal of Biliteracy, a separate initiative that almost completely relies on grades and assessments. The SSCE, on the other hand, favors performance based-assessments that include meaningful opportunities for reflection as well as authentic audiences. And while county leaders have been guiding educators toward this model in professional development and communities of practice, evaluating student portfolios or oral presentations requires more time and work, which creates additional challenges for schools. As one county leader from GCOE relayed, "that was hard because the more you create these systems that are more equitable for kids, the more work you're creating for yourself. And if only the history department is on board, then I don't know if that's sustainable." Additionally, in some regions, many of the teachers who have attended county-led professional development sessions teach only Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate classes, and frequently they are the only representatives of their schools to come to these events. Without school or district leaders in these trainings to focus SSCE efforts beyond a single classroom, individual teachers can influence only their own curricula, and opportunities to earn the SSCE will not be provided equitably to all students. Finally, ensuring that the SSCE is truly accessible will require that local education agencies (LEAs) develop a systemic approach to civic learning, wherein all students are provided with opportunities to engage in civic learning experiences through multiple pathways over time. As is often the case, integrating civic learning opportunities exclusively via student clubs, after-school learning, or higher-track classes will reach only a small portion of the student population.³⁶

Glenn County Office of Education

As an office located in a rural county, GCOE is capitalizing on educators' increased interest in online professional development to provide a training platform around the SSCE. Over the course of the 2020–2021 school year, 25 teachers from across California Region 2 participated in a community of practice through the CLIC Project, where they developed local SSCE criteria to take back to their school administrators. In the summer of 2021, the county brought Myron Dueck, an education consultant, to work with a group of teachers in reimagining assessments that put student voice and choice at the center of the process. The Region 2 lead is also actively working with a few school districts in the area who are using newly acquired federal funds to adopt updated history–social science curricula with inquiry and civic learning embedded throughout.

Los Angeles County Office of Education

LACOE's efforts to implement the SSCE in its school districts draw on the California Democracy School Civic Learning Initiative. In order to participate in the initiative, schools must earn the distinction of being a California Democracy School by creating a curriculum that guides all students in at least one grade level through five phases of high-quality civic learning³⁷ at least once during a school year.

The county provides in-person and online opportunities for educators to participate in the California Democracy School professional development series. They also facilitate collaborative meetings to allow participating schools and districts to support each other's efforts to institutionalize civic learning. In this way, the California Democracy School Civic Learning Initiative serves as a strong foundation from which schools and districts can launch the SSCE; thus far, 32 schools have been named California Democracy School by LACOE.

In addition, LACOE hosted an event titled The State Seal of Civic Engagement Los Angeles County Collaborative in early 2021,

where district, school, and teacher leaders came together to learn more about the SSCE, share ideas and examples, and began to outline plans and criteria for local rollout efforts. In the upcoming school year, LACOE will host a virtual institute over four sessions to further support LEAs interested in exploring best practices in civic learning and developing an implementation plan.

Monterey County Office of Education

MCOE is primarily working with its school districts through the CLIC Project. Within these communities of practice, participants meet quarterly to share how their local criteria for the SSCE align with other district initiatives (e.g., ethnic studies, environmental literacy). Participants are also collaborating to develop common grade-level assessments, benchmarks, and portfolio systems. Moreover, MCOE holds monthly meetings with the Monterey County Youth Civic Leadership Forum and Youth Climate Leadership Council to work on a climate action plan that aims to reduce emissions in the county by 40% by the year 2030.

Although the CDE does not require counties to track demographic data around the SSCE, MCOE is encouraging LEAs to monitor students' progress by race/ethnicity, gender, disability status, English language learner status, homelessness, and foster placement. When students begin earning the SSCE, school districts in Monterey County will then be able to analyze the data to identify and address issues of inequity.

Riverside County Office of Education

The Riverside County Office of Education (RCOE) has committed intentional professional and financial resources in support of the Civic Engagement Research Group's (CERG's) efforts to assist participating Riverside County school districts with implementation of the SSCE. In June of 2021, RCOE funded a summer institute for teams of educators (e.g., district- and school-level administrators, teachers) who were interested in rolling out the SSCE over the next school year. More than 60 educators from 10 school districts attended the two-day institute, where participants analyzed the strengths and weaknesses of existing civic learning opportunities in their local contexts and drafted a SSCE action plan. The summer institute was chiefly created by CERG leaders Dr. Joseph Kahne, Dr. Erica R. Hodgins, and Dr. Leah Bueso, and was operated in collaboration with Carolyn Power from the Riverside Unified School District, R. Tolteka Cuauhtin from Mikva Challenge, and RCOE administrators Dr. Michael Roe, Don Powell, and Kevin Goodly. Importantly, RCOE's financial support of certificated teachers provided stipends to fund their attendance at the summer institute and the time required for additional planning as they put their action plans into place. RCOE administrators will subsequently provide personalized coaching to district teams over the 2021–2022 school year focusing on classroom, campus, and community strategies to exponentially increase civic engagement in authentic and relevant ways.

Sacramento County Office of Education

As the leaders of the CLIC Project, SCOE supports statewide and regional communities of practice in implementing their History-Social Science Framework. At the local level, SCOE also engages in this work with its own school districts, in particular, through court and community schools serving incarcerated youth, students who have been expelled from other school districts, and 18–24-year-olds in the Senior Extension Program. SCOE is currently conceptualizing what it means for students in alternative education programs to earn the SSCE through learning to navigate local work and service systems, investigating

issues relevant to their own schooling experience, and co-constructing the criteria for earning the SSCE. What's more, in an effort to build "on ramps" to stronger civic learning and civic engagement opportunities, SCOE is exploring options for awarding the SSCE to elementary- and middle-school students. Ideally, SCOE leaders envision the fully realized SSCE initiative as a "civic experience that starts in kindergarten" and feeds into programs offered at every school level.

Summary

County offices of education are a critical support system for schools and districts interested in adopting the SSCE. In fact, they are uniquely positioned to facilitate interdisciplinary professional development, create relevant supplementary content for the state, and provide spaces for educators to give and receive feedback on the development of their local criteria for the SSCE. County leaders should continue to raise the profile of civic learning as it relates to the SSCE, while also supporting school districts to expand civic learning and civic engagement more generally, for all students.

Endnotes:

³⁴ <https://www.cde.ca.gov/pd/ca/hs/hssstate Seal.asp>

³⁵ <https://files.constantcontact.com/4d9b517b601/800935b3-8609-41c2-b11e-7549d7cb2b60.pdf>

³⁶ Kahne, J., & Middaugh, E. (2008). *Democracy for some: The civic opportunity gap in high school* (CIRCLE Working Paper 59). Tufts University, Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life., Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement. https://circle.tufts.edu/sites/default/files/2019-12/WP59_TheCivicOpportunityGapinHighSchool_2008.pdf

³⁷ The five phases of high-quality civic learning include inquiry, investigation, civil dialogue, communicating conclusions, and taking informed action

Themes and Recommendations

The district portraits and student experiences included in this report tell the story of seven early adopters of the State Seal of Civic Engagement (SSCE), in a variety of different contexts. While some districts were just beginning to focus on civic learning in their schools, others have been implementing civic initiatives for many years. These districts are situated in diverse locales (i.e., urban, suburban, or rural) and are structured to support students in a number of educational settings (e.g., comprehensive, community, and alternative schools). By drawing on the experiences of these seven early adopters, we highlight best practices for promoting a high-quality, sustainable, and equitable rollout of the SSCE, as well as for paving the way toward a systemic commitment to civic learning more broadly.

Of course, it bears noting that these districts are all in the early phases of rolling out the SSCE, which means they are still learning and adapting along the way. But that is how meaningful systemic change occurs: the process is iterative, and the most successful districts will continuously review and revise their plans as new challenges arise and the needs of their students evolve over time. And as these initiatives expand, across districts and throughout the state, new and different lessons will emerge. With this in mind, we acknowledge and appreciate our seven early adopters for sharing their experiences in the midst of the unknown, while simultaneously recognizing that their unique experiences are not representative of every initiative currently taking place in California.

Below we outline recommendations and guiding questions for educators that relate to three broad categories: (1) student voice, (2) equity and accessibility, and (3) infrastructure. For any district to fully integrate a systemic commitment to civic learning alongside an adoption of the SSCE, it will be critical to take seriously various dimensions across all three categories.



Student Voice

- Recruit a representative group of students to serve on the SSCE stakeholder committee
- Provide meaningful and authentic opportunities for students to co-construct SSCE curriculum
- Be responsive to student input, feedback, and critiques



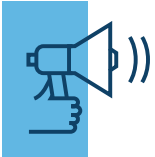
Equity and Accessibility

- Define civic excellence as a goal for all students, not the top few
- Design equitable civic learning opportunities from the get-go (i.e., equity should not be an afterthought)
- Examine whether traditional eligibility measures (e.g., GPA) are serving as barriers to participation



Infrastructure

- Adopt the SSCE alongside a broader commitment to democratic education
- Provide staff and support for the SSCE and civic learning
- Integrate many voices through democratic processes
- Pave the way for high-quality, informed civic engagement projects



Student Voice is Essential

As districts prepare to implement the SSCE, it will be critical to provide authentic and meaningful opportunities for student voice in order to model a truly democratic process. To do so, districts can start by recruiting a diverse selection of student representatives to serve on a SSCE stakeholder committee, and then facilitating these students' active participation in the development of SSCE criteria. For example, one student from each high school in the Salinas Union High School District served on the SSCE stakeholder committee that developed the district-wide civic learning plan detailing the rollout of the SSCE. Students can also play important roles in the creation of curriculum, civic engagement projects, and partnerships with community organizations. In fact, the more that students get the chance to shape their own civic learning opportunities, the easier it will be to get their buy-in, as well as that of their peers, once the program is underway. Finally, students can engage with other district stakeholders to help monitor progress and the extent to which the SSCE is accessible to all students.

At the same time, educators should be aware of common pitfalls that can thwart efforts to elevate student voice in schools. For example, many educators are tempted to recruit student leaders who are actively involved in other school activities (e.g., student government); however, these students already have a platform or other opportunities to be heard at their school. When educators in Fresno Unified School District made an effort to recruit hard-to-reach students for the SSCE, they saw positive increases in student engagement and attendance, in particular among students who were typically disinterested in participating. As another example, when districts and schools decide to make space for student voice, their efforts must go beyond a performative inclusion of students into traditionally adult spaces. Students should receive multiple opportunities to be heard, to take on leadership roles in school meetings, and to witness their feedback being given due weight. Indeed, for student voice to actually mean something in the process, districts and schools must commit to being responsive to the demands and critiques of their students.



Guiding Questions for Educators

- Are students provided with opportunities to participate in decision-making?
- If so, which students are included in the process? Are they representative of the larger student population?
- Are administrators and teachers responsive to student input, feedback, and/or criticism?



Equity and Accessibility

Even though the California Department of Education (CDE) does not require that districts track equity or accessibility indicators related to the SSCE, several early adopters have prioritized efforts to make earning the SSCE attainable for all of their students from the earliest phases of implementation. These districts do not view the SSCE as just another award recognizing high-achieving students, but rather as a lever for systematic change with respect to student engagement and campus culture. Of course, this mindset requires redefining what "civic excellence" means for students, such that mastery is about preparing them to participate in and contribute to their communities and society in meaningful and positive ways. In this respect, civic excellence is akin to graduation: an achievement that educators and families should desire for all students, and not merely the top few.

In order for equity and accessibility efforts to make a lasting impact, they must be built into the SSCE from the beginning

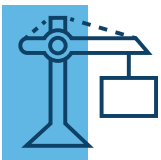
and then consistently revisited to address the changing needs of target populations. For example, Anaheim Union High School District provides its students with multiple opportunities to participate in civic engagement projects through a generalized curriculum so that students unable to participate in higher-tracked classes or through extracurricular activities are not excluded from earning the SSCE. Similarly, the Orange County Department of Education is designing curriculum to explicitly respond to the unique needs of its student populations (e.g., those with little to no access to the internet or outside community, or those who are highly transitory) because they believe in the SSCE's potential to make learning purposeful for students in alternative education settings. As another example, educators running the pilot program in Fresno Unified School District specifically recruited hard-to-reach students to design the school's inaugural civic engagement project with the hopes of increasing buy-in from similarly situated students and being able to measure the effect of the SSCE on attendance, engagement, and graduation rates.



Guiding Questions for Educators

- What high-quality civic learning opportunities are currently available to students? Who are they serving and who is left out?
- What skills and dispositions reflect civic excellence? Do our SSCE criteria and performance assessments measure them?
- What data can districts and schools voluntarily collect to monitor equity and accessibility?

Needless to say, these are only a few examples of how districts can make equity and accessibility a priority when adopting the SSCE. But even districts focused on these goals can institute policies that serve to exclude interested and deserving students from earning the SSCE. One common instinct for many educators is to include restrictive eligibility measures such as grade point average (GPA) minimums, passing scores on a citizenship or constitution exam, attendance records, and clean discipline histories in a district's proposed SSCE criteria. However, such restrictions ultimately shut out those student populations who stand to benefit the most from civic learning opportunities. On its face, one might be tempted to say that the chance to earn the SSCE should incentivize students to perform and behave better in school, but in actuality our research has found the reverse to be true, that student participation in high-quality civic learning opportunities, like the SSCE, is frequently an incentive for students to engage and connect with their school and surrounding communities. As such, we must ask ourselves whether the traditional metrics we use to measure academic achievement serve the true purpose of the SSCE, and whether they are serving the civic needs of our students.



Infrastructure

The seven early adopters we profiled were either creating new structures to support this work or were deepening existing structures to expand their ability to integrate the SSCE into their schools. In particular, we identified four aspects of infrastructure that are important to consider as districts develop the systems and supports needed to effectively implement the SSCE: (1) adopt the SSCE Alongside a Broader Commitment to Democratic Education, (2) provide adequate staffing and resources to support the SSCE and civic learning, (3) integrate many voices through democratic processes, and (4) pave the way for students to create high-quality informed civic engagement projects.

Adopt the SSCE Alongside a Broader Commitment to Democratic Education. While the SSCE creates a great opportunity to advance civic learning in California, a school's progress will be limited if LEAs implement the SSCE as a separate initiative that doesn't connect to broader learning goals for students. The SSCE is one promising effort that should be coupled

with a range of other endeavors aimed at integrating a systemic and equitable commitment to student voice and civic learning. Unfortunately, as described earlier, the LEADE Initiative research team found that civic and democratic goals are frequently marginal to districts' mission statements,³⁸ and a full 41% of districts were silent on the social purpose of education. In addition, civic and democratic commitments are often absent from districts' accountability plans: in their 2017–2018 local control accountability plans (LCAPs), 87% of all the districts in the state did not mention civic(s), citizen(s), citizenship, or democracy. A systemic commitment to and investment in civic learning is required in order to support young people in developing the knowledge, skills, and capacities needed to participate fully and effectively in democracy.

Several of the early adopters highlighted in this report had set their sights on a broader vision of committing to civic learning in addition to adopting the SSCE. In many of the districts, attention to civic or community readiness was already included in a mission or vision statement, graduate profile, or LCAP. Riverside, Salinas, and Fresno had all previously developed district-wide civic learning plans that outlined a range of efforts to advance civic learning across schools in the district. Other districts were considering ways to embed civic learning opportunities across grade levels and content areas so that civic readiness isn't relegated to a single project at the end of the 12th-grade year. Clearly, these kinds of systemic efforts take time and are more manageable and impactful when implemented as a multiyear initiative.

It will be important for LEAs to also build in regular opportunities to take stock and reflect on progress to their goals, such as students' equitable access to the SSCE. There is no mechanism, at least at this point, to collect or analyze detailed data regarding the SSCE on a state level. Therefore, LEAs will need to monitor this on their own to gain insights that can inform important conversations and decisions over time about how to deepen and strengthen the efforts to promote youth civic learning and engagement.

Provide Staff and Support for the SSCE and Civic Learning. In order to effectively and equitably roll out the SSCE, additional staffing and support must be provided, on both the district and the school levels. One such support is dedicating staff capacity and attention to civics. Unfortunately, in 2020 the LEADE team found a general lack of staffing and infrastructure at the district level to support civics, history, and social science compared with that for other academic areas.³⁹ For example, many districts had more than one staff member dedicated to English language arts, math, and science; in contrast, only 29% of districts in the sample had a staff member dedicated to history and social sciences (HSS), and none employed more than one person in this area. Notably, several of the early adopters we examined had a district-level position dedicated to HSS and civics, and some were beginning to invest in more staffing at the district and school levels. For instance, Anaheim not only invested in district staff, they also had two teacher leaders—one at the high school level and one at the middle school level—to support teacher training and coaching in the district. Other districts were considering identifying a civics lead at each high school who could shepherd the SSCE forward with their colleagues and, in some cases, possibly receive a one-period course release.

Another critical mode of support will be the provision of professional development opportunities and time for teachers to collaborate with one another in order to build knowledge, skills, and capacity in civics. We cannot assume that teachers, even HSS teachers, are prepared to implement the kinds of learning opportunities that will support students to attain the



Guiding Questions for Educators

- How can the adoption of the SSCE go hand-in-hand with a broader systemic commitment to civic learning?
- How is civic or community readiness attended to in the district's mission/ vision statement, LCAP, and curricular goals?
- How can we monitor progress so that we are regularly reflecting and deliberating on what's working and what's not?



Guiding Questions for Educators

- What staffing and infrastructure is needed at the district and at school sites to implement the SSCE in an effective manner?
- What professional development is needed to support teachers in implementing civic learning aligned to the SSCE?
- How can we draw on models in the state as well as share our own successes so we can learn and improve together?

SSCE. Many of the early adopters' district civic-learning plans included robust professional development plans. In addition, several county offices of education host regional networks of practice where LEAs can come together and learn from one another. In particular, professional development and support will be necessary to help school leaders and teachers navigate the contentiousness and debate that so often accompanies civic learning in today's political climate. Schools play an important role in helping young people become informed about societal issues by drawing on a range of sources and multiple perspectives; they are a vital forum where students can learn how to engage in productive and respectful dialogue across differences and find meaningful and constructive ways to participate in democracy. Districts, schools, and educators cannot afford to sit on the sidelines and leave the next generation of civic leaders unprepared.

Finally, when asked what types of support they wished they had, the participants we spoke with all highlighted the need for successful models of LEAs, schools, and students who had engaged with the SSCE.

Participants wanted examples from across the state—in particular, from within contexts similar to their own, such as rural areas, large urban districts, and alternative-education settings. They also wanted to learn about the range of civic engagement projects that students had created. As LEAs move further forward in their implementation of the SSCE and continue to learn about approaches that are most effective, it will be essential to lift up the lessons learned by early participants in the program, so that together we can strengthen our efforts to promote youth civic engagement for all young people in the state. In addition, we should not miss out on the opportunity to celebrate all young people working to earn the SSCE by engaging in dynamic and meaningful projects focused on issues that matter to them, even when these projects or perspectives may be challenging to adults or to the status quo.

Integrate Many Voices Through Democratic Processes. In addition to student voices, districts should take care to include a variety of school and community members in support of the civic work in the district. This means inviting administrators, counselors, and teachers from across grade levels and subject areas to reimagine what interdisciplinary civic learning opportunities could look like throughout students' K–12 school experiences, as well as families and other community stakeholders (e.g., local nonprofits and businesses) to explore external support and partnership opportunities. For example, several of the early adopters in this report took care to include students, families, and community members on their SSCE stakeholder committees planning and preparing for SSCE adoption. Such a diversity of perspectives better allows districts to identify and address the needs of their students, gather buy-in from the school and surrounding community members, and build more sustainable and comprehensive civic education programs. Moreover, representative SSCE stakeholder committees can themselves serve as exemplary microcosms of democratic participation, for youth and adults alike.



Guiding Questions for Educators

- Who can and should be part of planning and supporting civic initiatives in the district?
- Is the SSCE stakeholder committee at your district and school site representative of the school and surrounding community?
- Are SSCE stakeholder committee members given appropriate supports (e.g. time, stipends) to collaborate on planning and feedback?

To be sure, the success of a SSCE stakeholder committee does not solely hinge on the composition of its members. Districts must make space and time for educators to plan and collaborate with each other and for committee members to collect meaningful and consistent feedback on the rollout of the SSCE (e.g., the annual surveys and data collection performed in the Riverside Unified School District). Districts must also make adjustments on the basis of their respective contexts. For example, rural districts may need to partner with nearby districts' SSCE stakeholder committees to pool training and implementation resources, as was done in Region 2, whereas urban districts may benefit from more localized SSCE stakeholder committees at each school site.

Pave the Way for High-Quality Informed Civic Engagement Projects. One particular aspect of the SSCE that may necessitate new kinds of support is Criteria 3, which calls on students to participate in one or more informed civic engagement projects that addresses real-world problems. This criteria will open up a range of opportunities for students to be involved in improving their school or community; such efforts have been linked to a number of positive outcomes, such as the development of social trust or "faith in people," the development of collaborative action/engagement skills, opportunities for youth agency, social relatedness, and political-moral understanding.⁴⁰ However, research shows that only when community service included understanding possible causes of and solutions to the social problems it was addressing was it positively related to civic engagement later in life.⁴¹ Therefore, it will be important for districts to consider how to involve students in high-quality and robust civic engagement projects, ones that reach beyond merely an hours requirement and provide the chance for students to both investigate the issues and determine possible solutions as part of the cycle of taking action.

One of the best ways to ensure that students have the opportunity to engage in high-quality civic engagement projects is to build them into the core curriculum across grade levels and subject areas. For example, Anaheim Union High School District has been training teachers and supporting the integration of civic engagement projects into a range of courses so that students will have multiple opportunities to earn the SSCE.

Another important strategy is to support educators in learning about authentic ways to assess civic engagement projects. As districts determine how best to evaluate students' civic engagement projects, they may include considerations of the duration, depth, and impact of engagements. In Riverside Unified School District (RUSD), teachers from high schools across the district will work together to develop a common rubric for evaluating civic engagement projects that draws on authentic measures and best practices in performance assessment. At the same time, CDE emphasizes that "participation in informed civic engagement activities may take many forms." Therefore, districts will need to recognize a range of ways in which young people will engage in their community and society in pursuit of earning the SSCE.

RUSD, as well as other early adopters, has developed connections with a number of organizations and programs outside of schools that are deeply engaged in developing young people's civic engagement. It will be key for LEAs to partner with community-based organizations (CBOs) invested in similar work who could support students' attainment of the SSCE through activities that may happen outside of the school day.



Guiding Questions for Educators

- How can students be supported to engage in high-quality civic engagement projects via the core curriculum?
- How can educators work together to outline authentic criteria for assessing students' civic engagement projects?
- How can schools and community-based organizations work together to promote students' civic engagement projects?

Endnotes:

- ³⁸ Rogers, J., Hodgins, E., Kahne, J., Cooper Geller, R., Kwako, A., Alkam S., & Bingener, C. (2020). *Reclaiming the Democratic Purpose of California's Public Schools*. Research Report, Leveraging Equity & Access in Democratic Education Initiative at UCLA & UC Riverside. <https://centerx.gseis.ucla.edu/leade/publications/reclaiming-the-democratic-purpose-of-californias-public-schools/>
- ³⁹ Rogers et al., 2020
- ⁴⁰ Youniss, J., McEllan, J., & Yates, M. (1997). *What we know about engendering civic identity*. *American Behavioral Scientist*. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0002764297040005008>
- ⁴¹ Commission on Youth Voting and Civic Knowledge. (2013). *All together now: Collaboration and innovation for youth engagement: The report of the Commission on Youth Voting and Civic Knowledge*. Tufts University, Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life, Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement. <https://circle.tufts.edu/our-research/broadening-youth-voting/commission-youth-voting-and-civic-knowledge>

Conclusion

In the United States, we are more divided along ideological lines today than at any point in the previous two decades.⁴² A large majority of Americans report that the tone and nature of political debate has become more negative, less respectful, less fact-based, and less substantive.⁴³ This contentious political discourse can even be found in schools and classrooms. A 2017 study found that more than 20% of teachers reported heightened polarization on campus and incivility in their classrooms.⁴⁴ In spite of this climate, however, a national poll found that civics learning holds widespread and cross-partisan appeal as a potential solution to the challenges present in our democracy.⁴⁵ Furthermore, poll respondents identified teachers as a trusted source of civic education. However, in the current politically polarized climate, little agreement exists about what should constitute civic education and what role schools should play in that education.

However, at the very foundation of public education lies a democratic mission of preparing young people to participate in democracy. In spite of the political tensions, schools and educators can have a significant impact toward restoring democratic values and norms and fostering democratic knowledge and skills in young people. While the State Seal of Civic Engagement (SSCE) is but one tool with which to boost civic engagement among young people, it is an important one with the potential to help renew the democratic purpose of California's public schools. When a local education agency (LEA) adopts the SSCE, they are making a public commitment to civic learning and engagement. LEAs clearly will need to act beyond this public commitment, however, to also uncover meaningful pathways for all students to access high-quality and equitable civic-learning experiences.

The portraits of the seven early adopters described in this report provide a starting point for leaders and educators across the state when considering how they might implement the SSCE alongside a range of other efforts that promote student voice and civic learning. These portraits do not offer a one-size-fits-all menu or a checklist of steps to take. Instead, they provide snapshots of how a diverse set of school districts in California adopted the SSCE, what they learned along the way, and some considerations for other communities to reflect upon. As new LEAs begin to adopt the SSCE and those early adopters move forward into subsequent phases of implementation, it will remain critical for all stakeholders to prioritize student voice, equity and accessibility, and infrastructure that provides systemic support, so that the SSCE is able to reach its full potential. It will also be necessary for educators, leaders, and policymakers to connect and collaborate around promising approaches and lessons learned, so that we may continue to reflect on how best to offer all young people in California an opportunity to earn the SSCE and engage in robust and meaningful experiences wherein they learn about issues they care about, discuss and deliberate across differences, and engage actively in democracy.

Endnotes:

⁴² Dimock, M., & Wike, R. (2020). *America is exceptional in the nature of its political divide*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/11/13/america-is-exceptional-in-the-nature-of-its-political-divide/>

⁴³ Doherty, C. (2017). *Key takeaways on Americans' growing partisan divide over political values*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/10/05/takeaways-on-americans-growing-partisan-divide-over-political-values/>

⁴⁴ Rogers, J., Franke, M., Yun, J.-E. E., Ishimoto, M., Diera, C. Cooper Geller, R., Berryman, A., & Brenes, T. (2017). *Teaching and learning in the age of Trump: Increasing stress and hostility in America's high schools*. University of California, Los Angeles, Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access. <https://idea.gseis.ucla.edu/publications/teaching-and-learning-in-age-of-trump>

⁴⁵ CivXNow. (2020). *A solution to what ails our democracy* [infographic]. <https://civxnow.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/CivXNow-infographic-Luntz-polling-FINAL.pdf>

Appendix: SSCE Resources

Implementation Resources

The California Department of Education (<https://www.cde.ca.gov/pd/ca/hs/hssstate Seal.asp>) has provided criteria and guidance for each component of the SSCE, as well as civic learning resources, to support districts in determining how to implement the Seal in their local context and ensure it is accessible and inclusive.

The Authentic Preparation for Today (<https://www.civicseal.org/home>) working group (formerly, PACCCRAS) has created the following resources to support districts and schools throughout the state in implementing the SSCE:

- **SSCE Roadmap:**
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Gi_SF_ZdR0qO1Y-BEy0-mEmk_AsJ1wuG/view
- **SSCE Roadmap Research Brief:**
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1KLIPp8GX3OdRbRHKWz8TIN7ncjYL96ue/view?usp=sharing>
- **Supporting Resources:**
<https://www.civicseal.org/supporting-resources>

The Civic Engagement Research Group (<https://www.civicsurvey.org/>) has created a curated collection of resources focused on the SSCE on their Educating 4 Democracy website (<https://www.ed4democracy.org/topics/ca-state-seal-of-civic-engagement>). They also created a planning packet to help districts and schools begin implementing the SSCE in their respective local contexts. The planning packet includes detailed steps and guiding questions that allow educators to create an equity-focused inventory and action plan. To access the planning packet, visit <https://docs.google.com/document/d/18wQZBW9AmnzUdPAkISRSPENkIx00v9afNOUQzioG8xQ/edit>.

GENup (<https://www.generationup.net/>) is a California-based, nationwide student-led social justice organization and student-activist coalition that strives to advocate for education through the power of youth voices. GENup is organizing youth in communities across the state to advocate and support efforts to implement the SSCE. To find out more, visit <https://www.generationup.net/state-seal-for-civic-engagement>.

Statewide Resources and Background Information

- **Revitalizing K-12 Civic Learning in California: A Blueprint for Action** (California Department of Education): <https://www.cde.ca.gov/eo/in/documents/cltfinalreport.pdf>

- **Civic Learning Award for California Public Schools** (California Department of Education): <https://www.cde.ca.gov/eo/in/civiclearningaward.asp>
- **History-Social Science Framework for California Public Schools** (California Department of Education): <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/hs/cf/documents/hssframeworkwhole.pdf>
- **Civic Learning Initiative** (Power of Democracy): <http://www.powerofdemocracy.org/>
- **California History-Social Science Project** (University of California, Davis): <https://chssp.ucdavis.edu/>
- **Content, Literacy, Inquiry, and Citizenship (CLIC) Project:** <https://californiahss.org/>
- **Educating for American Democracy:** <https://www.educatingforamericandemocracy.org/>
- **California Democracy School Civic Learning Initiative** (Los Angeles County Office of Education): <https://www.lacoe.edu/Curriculum-Instruction/History-Social-Science/California-Democracy-School>
- **Civic Education in California** (Facing History and Ourselves): <https://www.facinghistory.org/our-approach/civic-education/civic-education-california>
- **State Seal of Civic Engagement Initiative** (GENup): <https://www.generationup.net/state-seal-for-civic-engagement>
- **Learn more about other civic education organizations:** <https://www.ed4democracy.org/learn-more>

Regional Resources Focused on the SSCE

- **Los Angeles County Office of Education:**
<https://www.lacoe.edu/Curriculum-Instruction/History-Social-Science/State-Seal-of-Civic-Engagement>
- **Monterey County Office of Education:**
<https://sites.google.com/montereycoe.org/civiceducation/state-seal-of-civic-engagement?authuser=0>
- **Riverside County Office of Education:**
<https://bit.ly/RCOE-SSCEresources>

LEA Resources Focused on the SSCE

- **Riverside Unified School District's Five-Year District-Wide Civic Engagement Plan:**
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1PdTcY1SpGRi7Rv7bKQn3Sr_HmasTedoA/view?usp=sharing
- **Riverside Unified School District's SSCE website:**
<https://sites.google.com/riversideunified.org/rusdcivics/state-seal-of-civic-engagement?authuser=0>
- **Salinas Union High School District's Civic Learning Plan for 2021–2024:**
<https://sites.google.com/salinasuhd.org/historysocialstudies/home>
- **Fresno Unified Board Policy on Civic Education:**
<https://bp.fresnounified.org/wp-content/uploads/6142-3-BP-Civic-Education.pdf>
- **Fresno Unified School District Student Bill of Rights** (GENup Fresno):
<https://theknowfresno.org/05/21/2021/the-fresno-unified-school-district-bill-of-rights/>

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