PARTNERING FOR DEMOCRACY

How Community Organizations Can Help Close the Civic Achievement Gap

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The number of high school graduates in the United States who understand the basic tenets of civics continues to decline. Many factors contribute to this reality, including an assessment-driven educational focus, a narrowing curriculum, and irrelevant pedagogy. Underlying all of these is the fact that "political engagement is not a priority for schools" (Llewellyn, Cook, & Molina, 2010, p. 792). Citing a Delli Carpini and Keeter study regarding the decrease in civic knowledge from one generation to the next, Matto and Vercellotti (2012) state, "we also know that post-Baby Boom generations exhibit lower rates of knowledge about the processes of politics than preceding generations" (p. 728). The continued under-education of students in civics will have lasting implications for the country's democracy for generations. The combination of a teach-to-test mentality, insufficient curriculum, and ineffective teaching methods yields results that will eventually erode the country's very foundation.

This paper examines the current status of civic education in the United States, outlines any potential barriers to increasing civic knowledge in youth, reviews community-based approaches for increasing civic opportunity for youth, and, finally, makes recommendations about how YMCAs and other community-based organizations can serve as educational partners to help address the looming civic-knowledge crisis.

Ultimately, the use of effective civic-education programs will reverse the downward spiral of the civic-knowledge deficit and benefit the country by producing knowledgeable and engaged citizens. Fleming (2011) writes that "a curriculum for democracy is a curriculum for civic participation" (p. 48).

JOIN THE DISCUSSION

Visit Exchange to join the discussion about how community organizations can help close the civic achievement gap. As you read more about this topic, consider the following question:

If we don't address the growing civic-education gap in America, what are the consequences for the youth of today when they lead the nation and for the United States as a whole?

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THE STATE OF CIVIC EDUCATION

The U.S. education system, in general, is in a state of decline. This reality has prompted a myriad of political responses to the issue, including initiatives such as America 2000, Goals 2000: Educate America Act, and, most recently, No Child Left Behind and the Race to the Top. No Child Left Behind emphasizes reading, writing, proficiency in English, mathematics, and science. The act mandates evaluation of the progress of students in each of the areas through standardized testing (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). The Obama Administration's Race to the Top provides competitive grants to school districts that focus on science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM; Johnson, 2012).

NARROWING CURRICULUM

The specific areas of focus prescribed by No Child Left Behind and the Race to the Top have become the capstone of the student educational plan. They are taught and funded accordingly. As a result, other subjects, including civics, are no longer given the attention they deserve in the classroom. In a speech at a national conference, Rick Theisen, former president of the National Council for the Social Studies, said No Child Left Behind "has done more harm to social studies education than anything else" (GreatSchools, n.d.).

In 2012, Godsay, Henderson, Levine, and Littenberg-Tobias released the results of a national survey of state civic-education requirements, which revealed that only "39 states require at least one course in American government or civics" (p. 1). The same report disclosed that only nine states have graduation requirements that include the passage of a social studies test. By mandating testing only in particular subjects, No Child Left Behind effectively narrowed teaching and funding to only those subjects. Simply put, the mission of education follows the money, and civic education is no longer a priority for investment.

DECLINING CIVIC KNOWLEDGE

Unsurprisingly then, the level of understanding American high school graduates have of the basic tenets of civics continues to decline (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2011). Periodically, the NCES, which is a branch within the U.S. Department of Education, conducts tests to determine students' academic achievement in different areas. One of their reports, **The Nation's Report Card: Civics 2010**, served as a foundation for this white paper. The report showed that 36 percent of high school seniors failed to achieve a basic understanding of the U.S. political system. This represents a 2 percent decline in civic knowledge among high school seniors since the 2006 NCES study (NCES, 2011, p. 35). Figure 1 illustrates the decline since 1998 as presented in the study. It shows the percentage of high school seniors who fail to achieve even a basic understanding of issues related to the foundations and workings of the U.S. political system and the role that citizens need to play in a democratic society (Lutkus, Weiss, Campbell, Mazzeo, & Lazer, 1999).
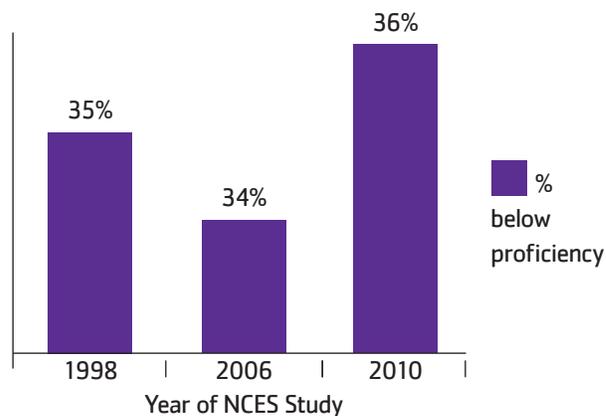

Figure 1. The decline of civics proficiency in American high school students. Data from "The Nation's Report Card: Civics 2010," by the National Center for Educational Statistics, 2011, NCES 2011–466.

More than half of American high school graduates don't understand basic civics as they enter adulthood—the time at which they gain the right to vote and the responsibilities of citizenship (NCES, 2011). As early as 1983, in a report to the U.S. Secretary of Education, the National Commission on Excellence in Education sounded the alarm, stating that "if an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war" (p. 5). Based on the statistics presented in **The Nation's Report Card: Civics 2010**, American democracy is seriously threatened, not by foreign invaders, but rather by a complete failure of the education system.

According to data from the U.S. Department of Education, the only conclusion that can be drawn from the decline in civics proficiency is that the pedagogical methods used in high school civics are simply deficient.

Westheimer and Kahne (2003) share the results of a study by the National Constitution Center that found that "only 38% percent of respondents could name all three branches of the government," and yet a separate poll revealed that "59% of all Americans could name all three Stooges" (p. 242). This is a frightening testimony to the state of civic education. It represents a civic-knowledge crisis.

What can be done? If rote memorization and lectures are no longer relevant to students, what are the remaining options for teaching this vitally important subject matter to the next generation of national leaders? Without a clear strategy, there will be a missing link between the knowledge and the application of that knowledge.

BEST PRACTICES IN TEACHING CIVIC EDUCATION

As educators seek out the best methods to teach civics to their students, many adhere to the century-old concept of **experiential learning** from John Dewey, embracing the idea that experience and education are inseparable (Lay & Smarick, 2006, p. 132). This paper will combine Dewey's original concept with one from Conrad and Hedin (1982), who discuss "educational programs offered as an integral part of the general school curriculum, but taking place outside of the conventional classroom **or using non-traditional methods (simulations, mock experiences, etc.)**, where students are in new roles featuring significant tasks with real consequences, and where the emphasis is on learning by doing with associated reflection" (p. 58; boldface added). This view of teaching is supported by Schachter (1998) in his summary of all the task force reports from the American Political Science Association in the early 20th century that "inveigh against rote learning; the practice of having students memorize passages from constitutions and textbooks met universal disdain" (p. 631).

Kahne and Westheimer (2003) find that many schools provide opportunities for their students **to know** but few opportunities for them **to do** in the context of civic education (p. 58). Dewey himself recognized the difference between "activity and intelligent activity," stating that intelligent activity involved delaying action until "observation and judgment have occurred" (Hedin, 2010, p. 110). For maximum educational effect, knowledge must be processed by the learner rather than dictated by the educator (Estes, 2004). Therefore, as Hedin suggested, experiential learning must be intentional to ensure that learning occurs (2010, p. 115). Oros (2007) shares the importance of experiential learning as a pedagogical choice for the classroom as follows: "One study in the natural sciences found that students retain 10% of what they read, 20% of what they hear, 30% of what they see, 50% of what they see and hear, 70% of what they say, and 90% of what they do and say together" (p. 295). The study supports the axiom of Chinese philosopher Confucius, "I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand."

The literature uses the phrases **service-learning** and **experiential learning** interchangeably in reference to active learning styles in civic education. Both of the phrases have been classified as successful methodologies through empirical research, particularly in the field of youth development. In addition, both pass Dewey's (1938) litmus test that "all genuine education comes through experience" (p. 13). Still the two represent very different pedagogical approaches and desired outcomes. This white paper focuses on experiential learning as a means of increasing civic knowledge. Boyte (2003) identifies **civics** and **service** as terms within experiential civic education: "The first focuses on educating students about the formal political process...and the second, 'service' (or community service or service learning) is associated with communitarian political theory" (p. 85).

The founding fathers wanted a responsible and educated citizenry that would not only give back in service to their communities but also accept the burden of participation, which is why they created a representational democracy. This paper will use the definition of **civic education** from Benninga and Quinn (2011), who built on the meaning provided by Gibson and Levine in 2003 as follows: "the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that will prepare young people 'to be competent and responsible citizens' " (p. 107). More specifically, Youniss (2011) identifies the chief aim of civic education as "more than acquiring a set of facts, learning about rights and obligations, and becoming an informed voter"; it's "coming to know how to function in a democratic system and working to sustain it for oneself and for others" (p. 102). The ultimate goal is for students to have a solid understanding of civic knowledge through civic education so they can participate fully as engaged citizens.

BARRIERS TO ADDRESSING THE CIVIC-KNOWLEDGE CRISIS

The problem is clear; however the solution, as is often the case, is not so easy to see. There are many barriers to dealing directly with the civic-knowledge crisis.

POLITICAL RESPONSES TO AN EDUCATIONAL PROBLEM

U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has commented on the state of the U.S. education system as follows: "The United States came in 23rd or 24th in most subjects. We can quibble, or we can face the brutal truth that we're being out-educated" (Dillon, 2010, para. 9). As Secretary Duncan highlighted, the U.S. education system, in general, is in a state of decline. Much of the debate that has occurred regarding the state of education in the United States has transformed it into more of a political issue than an educational one. Westheimer and Kahne (2004a) added the subtitle "Political Choices and Pedagogical Goals" to their article "Educating the 'Good' Citizen" to reflect their "belief that the narrow and often ideologically conservative conception of citizenship embedded in many current efforts at teaching for democracy reflects neither arbitrary choices nor pedagogical limitations but rather political choices with political consequences" (p. 241).

Accountability is the word. Mann (1996) traces the historical roots of political responses to the educational problem to President George H. W. Bush's America 2000, "whose focus was on English, mathematics, science, history, and geography" (p. 47). Ives and Obenchain (2006) noted the continued development of the accountability movement, otherwise known as the **standards-based movement**, in the 1990s, with the focus on aligning education with the Clinton administration's Goals 2000: Educate America Act. In 2002, the George W. Bush administration introduced No Child Left Behind, which created a federal mandate for the adoption of standards aimed at addressing such endemic issues (Ives & Obenchain, 2006, p. 62).

One might expect applause in response to a mandate of national standards; finally, progress was being made on a seemingly intractable problem. As Kunin (1997) highlights, "the idea of standards continues to gain momentum because it is a common-sense assumption that, in order for children to achieve, we must define what they need to know and then determine how to measure whether or not they know it" (p. 153). The approach does not address an underlying problem, however: The issue is politicized and thus educators are no longer in control of what they teach. Boston (2005) points "to the impact of the No Child Left Behind Act and the disturbing imbalance and obsession with academics," noting that such "emphasis on academic performance has overpowered the nation's responsibility to help our children become engaged and productive citizens of our community" (p. 122). Walling (2007), citing **Guardian of Democracy: The Civic Mission of Schools**, a report from the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools in partnership with the Leonore Annenberg Institute for Civics, recounts, "The movement for high-stakes testing has had a huge impact on education nationally: schools are under unprecedented pressure to raise student achievement, which is now measured by standardized examinations of reading and mathematics" (p. 285).

THE LOW PRIORITY OF CIVIC EDUCATION FOR SCHOOLS

No Child Left Behind placed its greatest emphasis on the content areas of reading, mathematics, and science, as measured through the instrument of standardized testing (Feldmann, 2010, p. 29). Civic education scholar Margaret Stimmann Branson's remarks to the 2006 Idaho State Civic Learning Summit outline the dangers inherent in such an approach: "Although No Child Left Behind legislation speaks of 'core learning,' only reading and mathematics are used as measures of schools' success. Science is a poor third. And civic education is forgotten" (Walling, 2007, p. 285).

Kahne and Westheimer (2003) note, "the National Assessment of Educational Progress, which is often referred to as the 'Nation's Report Card,' measures performance in math and reading annually—but administers a civic assessment only about once every ten years" (p. 35). Such realities speak to the fact that civic engagement and teaching students the political process is not a priority for schools (Llewellyn et al., 2010, p. 792). In another study, Westheimer and Kahne (2003)

state "civic education is getting inadequate attention and is actually being cut back in some states as pressure to raise scores in math, reading, and science mounts" (p. 8). Because of this, civic education takes a backseat to other education priorities.

Citing a 2003 report from the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement and the Carnegie Corporation of New York, Walling (2007) pinpoints the cause for the civic-knowledge crisis as a "lack of institutional commitment to formal civic education" (p. 285). This is, however, not a new issue for civic education. Back in 1908, the American Political Science Association's Committee of Five stated, "Is it not a curious fact that though our schools are largely instituted, supported and operated by the government, yet the study of American government in the schools and colleges is the last subject to receive adequate attention?" (Schachter, 1998, p. 631).

Any human's natural response to perceived restrictions is to respect that which is inspected. This is no different for educators. In the words of Llewellyn et al. (2010), "teachers pointed to long lists of content and assessments as the reason why essays and tests took precedence over interactive lessons that may encourage students to engage in democratic reform, such as running meetings and even civil protest" (p. 801). Assessment-driven curriculum leads educators to narrow their focus, not out of desire, but out of necessity.

Ives and Obenchain (2006) cite the low priority civics has assumed as a negative consequence of a "high-stakes testing policy" that forces teachers to "focus on the recall of basic information over in-depth understanding as well as focusing primarily on information that teachers believe will be tested" (p. 63). Some schools are even carving out more time in their schedule for "score boosting drills in reading and math," which means taking time away from civics, art, and physical education (Feldmann, 2010, p. 29). Kahne, Chi, and Middaugh (2006) assert that, while "some educational practices and contexts promote the skills, knowledge, and dispositions that support a democratic society," the same research "also suggests...that schools are not doing all they could" (p. 388). Both political leaders and school administrators must decide to make civic education a priority (and make policies that support that effort) if the downward trend is to be reversed.

IRRELEVANT TEACHING METHODS

Most states require their high school curriculum to include the study of civics or the U.S. government, and Kahne et al. (2006) note that "approximately 90 percent of all high school students enroll in at least one civics or government course" (p. 391). Feldmann (2010) cites research conducted by Eric Riedel of the University of Minnesota on high school students, which found that "as many as two-thirds of the students involved in a traditional civics course felt a strong disconnect from the curricular material being presented and its usefulness in their immediate surroundings, particularly as to their 'obligation' to be a civic participant" (p. 30).

Wade and Yarbrough (2007) accurately state that a democracy lacking in participation is a democracy at risk. In his 2001 book, Getting Beyond the Facts: Teaching Social Studies/Social Sciences in the Twenty-First Century, Joe Kincheloe characterized the teaching and learning of social studies as the "nonconceptual, technical view of social studies teaching" (White, Marsh, & McCormack, 2011, p. 35). The disconnect between the learner and the curriculum, and the learner's consequent lack of participation, is directly linked to the relevance of the instructional material. Kahne et al. (2006) found that, "although experienced-based curricula appear desirable, substantial evidence indicated that they are not commonly found in classrooms" (p. 403).

Ord (2009) invokes Dewey's point of view on the topic of curriculum relevance: "A curriculum which acknowledges the social responsibilities of education must present situations where problems are relevant to the problems of living together..." (p. 507). It is the responsibility of the teacher to engage students and facilitate lessons and activities that, because of their relevance to students' lives, cause them to think (Estes, 2004). Surprisingly, the results of a study by Baldi, Perie, Skidmore, and Greenberg of the American Institutes for Research found that, "rather than having substantial opportunities for simulations or other experiential approaches, 90 percent of U.S. students reported in the recent International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement study (IEA) that they most commonly spent time reading textbooks and doing worksheets" (Kahne et al., 2006, p. 403). Stanley (2005) suggests that educators are faced with a tough pedagogical decision—that of "transmission or transformation" (p. 282).

Figure 2. American high school students' proficiency in civics by race/ethnicity. Reprinted from "The Nation's Report Card: Civics 2010," by the National Center for Educational Statistics, 2011, NCES 2011–466. Copyright © 2011 by the National Center for Educational Statistics. Reprinted with permission.
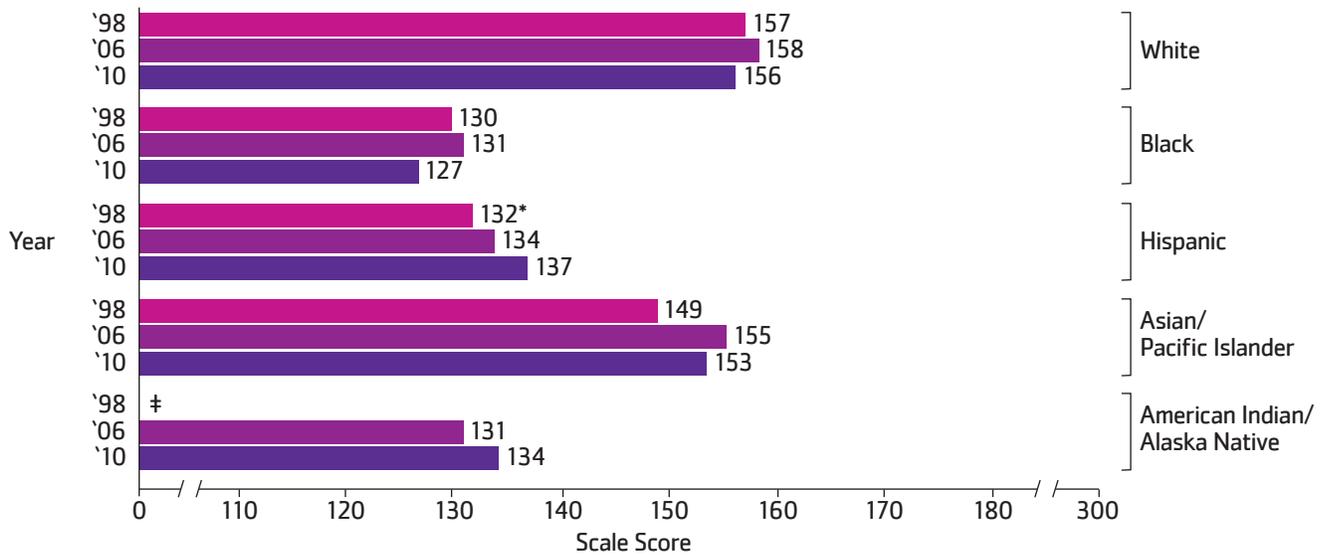
‡ Reporting standards not met. Sample size insufficient to permit a reliable estimate.
* Significantly different (p < .05) from 2010.
NOTE: Black includes African American, Hispanic includes Latino, and Pacific Islander includes Native Hawaiian.
Race categories exclude Hispanic origin.

When the pedagogical approach to presenting civics to students is bureaucratic rather than relevant, students and teachers respond with boredom (Llewellyn et al., 2010). Addressing the issue requires a student–centered approach—one that employs experiential learning and therefore "acts as a bridge between political science (the discipline) and the political world" (Sloam, 2010, p. 329). Kahne and Westheimer (2003) found that "as students developed the abilities to participate they saw their participation in civic affairs as more plausible....In this sense, each student's identity as an engaged, democratic citizen followed his or her capacity to be one" (p. 61).

UNEQUAL ACHIEVEMENT DATA

The civic-knowledge crisis is serious enough on its own, but the problem is compounded for some segments of U.S. society by the inequality of achievement data. When achievement data is examined, taking into account the various subgroups that can be found in the National Assessment of Educational Progress

(NAEP) civics standardized test results, it is obvious that students are not on an equal playing field as it relates to achievement. Figure 2 highlights the trend in average 12th grade scores on the NAEP civics assessment by race/ethnicity:

While there were no significant changes within each of the racial/ethnic groups, Figure 2 demonstrates a clear gap in civic knowledge between white and black, white and Hispanic, and white and American Indian/Alaska Native students. Similarly, achievement gaps exist between students who receive free or reduced lunch and those who do not. Though the cause of identified achievement gaps is purely speculative, evidence suggests that students who are given the opportunity to be involved actively in civic engagement demonstrate higher levels of civic knowledge (Menezes, 2003; O'Brien, 2004; Beaumont & Battisoni, 2006; Ives & Obenchain, 2006; Galston, 2007; Schmidt, Shumow, & Kackar, 2007). What is missing from the equation seems to be a lack of civic opportunity, particularly for some student populations.

A natural question then is, What happens if we simply do nothing? In 2001, the IEA shared the results of a study that tested the civic knowledge, engagement, and attitudes of 14-year-old students in 28 democratic countries (Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald, & Schulz, 2001). One of the major findings of the IEA study was that "young people agree that good citizenship includes the obligation to vote and to obey the law. However, four out of five students do not intend to participate in the conventional political activities generally associated with adult political involvement, such as joining a political party, writing letters to newspapers, or being a candidate for local office" (Torney-Purta et al., 2001 p. 1). One possible result of inactivity is a leadership vacuum and a disengaged citizenry that will not support the intent of participative democratic processes. As a consequence, the whole system could erode slowly.

THE ROLE OF THE SCHOOL

Thomas Jefferson wrote about the importance of civic education in 1820 in a letter to early-19th-century American diplomat William Jarvis: "I know of no safe depository of the ultimate powers of society but the people themselves, and if we think [the people] not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education" (Westheimer & Kahne, 2003, p. 8). Dudley and Gitelson (2003) posit that "if political knowledge is a necessary precondition to civic engagement it follows that, as political thinkers from Jefferson to Dewey have assumed, more and better education is the solution" (p. 265).

O'Brien (2004), citing the North Carolina Civic Education Consortium, illustrates the importance of school: "One cannot ignore the strong influence parents and family have on youth citizenship development; however, schools are in a unique position to improve the state of civic education" (p. 75). Benninga and Quinn (2011) assert that reviewing the expected learning standards for students makes it clear that public schools are prime settings for fostering the knowledge and behaviors required to take on the responsibilities of American identity and citizenship (p. 104).

Study after study highlights the school system as having one of the most crucial and influential roles in the development of young people and their ideologies (Beaumont & Battisoni, 2006; Levine, 2006; Llewellyn et al., 2010; Nugent, 2006; O'Brien, 2004; Westheimer & Kahne 2004b). School is the place where political identity and efficacy are developed (Beaumont & Battisoni, 2006; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004a) and it plays a significant role in improving civic engagement in students (Llewellyn et al., 2010). Nugent (2006) goes so far as to say that education (via school) "is the single greatest influence on young people's access to social and political life" (p. 229). Albert Shanker, former president of the American Federation of Teachers, had this to say in a speech entitled "Education and Democratic Citizenship": "How can we fail to build a world in which the rights due to every human being from birth are respected? In order to build this world… we must [have schools] teach democracy" (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004a, p. 241).

The Carnegie Corporation and the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) released a report in 2003 entitled **The Civic Mission of Schools**. Matto and Vercellotti (2012) reference this report, stating that it "emphasizes the importance of schools in developing civic knowledge, skills, and attitudes, noting that schools are the only institutions with the capacity and mandate to reach virtually every young person in the country" (p. 728). Westheimer and Kahne (2003) recognize that, "while the work of preparing citizens for democracy must include more than the schools, the schools are the public institution best positioned to affect the vast majority of young people" (p. 8).

For all of the emphasis placed on the importance of schools in civic education, the state of civics in this country makes it clear that more must be done. For too long, the community has viewed all matters of education as the job of the school system, but learning is not limited to the vacuum of a room within a school. To children, the world is their classroom. The priorities for schools have already been established through educational policies and, perhaps more important, through the availability of funding. The current educational focus (not to undervalue its importance) is STEM, not civics. This focus creates a void that must be filled by something outside of the educational system—community organizations such as the YMCA.

Blank, Jacobson, and Melaville (2012) of the Center for American Progress share that "the experience of local community initiatives suggests that collaborations between school districts and community partners are initiated by districts or by partner organizations" (p. 8). They emphasize that the "ultimate goal [of school–community partnerships] is collaboration toward a common vision and shared results…" (p. 8). Lonsdale and Anderson (2012) posit that the results of "school–community engagement can bring social, intellectual, financial, psychological and performance benefits" (p. 2).

Another important potential outcome of the school–community partnership is the ability to address fairly the civic achievement gap, which as Matto and

Vercellotti (2012) highlight, is a gap "in exposure to [civic] opportunities due to economic and social status" (p. 729). There are financial benefits to school–community partnerships " in the form of funding activities associated with the relationship or a by-product of the relationship," which removes financial obstacles that might otherwise be prohibitive for student participation in such programs (Lonsdale & Anderson, 2012, p. 2). Blank et al. (2012) underscore the importance of this financial component: "Research shows that low-income families regularly experience economic and material hardship: missed rent, utility shutoffs, inadequate access to healthcare, unstable childcare arrangements, and food insecurity that [can] inevitably affect students' readiness, attendance, performance, and completion rates at school" (p. 1), not to mention their participation in out-of-school activities. Civic education is an innocent victim of misdirected educational policy.

As a result "it has become important to look outside of schools for sites of civic engagement, especially among the youth" (Shiller, 2013, p. 70). Gimpel and Lay (2006) advise that "perhaps the connection between citizenship and formal education has been overemphasized—to the point we fail to consider other avenues for achieving political literacy" (p. 11). Schools have limited resources and therefore require assistance from community organizations to completely fulfill their mission. This line of reasoning supports the proverb that it takes a village to raise a child. The burden of providing opportunities for civic education, if such opportunities are to be successful, must become a project of the community.

THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

There are already many wonderful examples of community organizations that have partnered with schools to provide civic education.

STUDENT VOICES

The Student Voices program in Philadelphia's Central High School is a civic-education initiative that adopts a number of best practices and uses innovative media strategies to engage students. "Evaluations of the program have found that one semester of the curriculum is more effective than standard civics classes at heightening political interest, encouraging informational media use, increasing civic knowledge, and building political efficacy" (Feldman, Pasek, Romer, & Jamieson, 2007, p. 77).

SISTAS AND BROTHAS UNITED

Sistas and Brothas United (SBU) is the youth-development section of the Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition, which has been active since the 1970s. The "mission of SBU was and is to develop the leadership of youth in the Northwest Bronx community who are concerned with the conditions in their neighborhood, interested in developing ways to address these problems in concrete ways, and believe in their own ability to build people power to hold all public officials accountable for the decisions they make" (Shiller, 2013, p. 75).

ACTIVISTS COMING TO INFORM OUR NEIGHBORHOODS

Activists Coming to Inform Our Neighborhoods, or A.C.T.I.O.N., is the youth-development section of The Point, which has been around since the 1990s. The organization's work includes providing art space and afterschool programming and helping residents launch small businesses (Shiller, 2013). As part of A.C.T.I.O.N., The Point provides youth with stipends to identify social and environmental issues in their community, with the objective of creating a sustainable solution.

STATE YMCA OF GEORGIA

The State YMCA of Georgia, the organization that employs the author of this paper, has recently launched the Georgia Center for Civic Engagement. The Center's program mission is to address the civic-knowledge crisis in Georgia by providing opportunities for students to participate in experiential-learning programs related to civics and by providing resources (lesson plans, workshops, and other opportunities for professional development) to social studies educators. Specifically, the Center offers model simulations students can participate in to learn about the political processes of local, state, and national governments and the United Nations. Georgia's State School Superintendent has endorsed the Center as an innovative approach to address an issue cooperatively, saying, "these programs are a great resource for both Georgia's students and educators—and are particularly relevant as they are tied directly to our educational standards." He further challenged the program to expand into all schools in Georgia by 2020. The program has already shown success in the state's rural, urban, and suburban areas.

THE Y AND CIVIC EDUCATION

Community partnerships are not new to education—and certainly not new to the Y. As the State YMCA of Georgia example shows, the Y is another community organization that utilizes John Dewey's learn-by-doing philosophy in the context of civic education. The Y Youth and Government™ program started in 1936 in New York as a model state legislature. According to YMCA of the USA Technical Advisor for Youth Events, Suzanne Mabie, "as of the most recent count, YMCA Youth and Government programs serve more than 55,000 students in 39 states annually in programs that range from a model city government to a model state legislature to a model congress to a model United Nations." Additionally, YMCAs across the nation offer these programs to middle school and college students in addition to high school students.

The Civic Mission of Schools (Levine, 2006) highlights the following six proven practices that, together, constitute well-rounded civic education:

1. Discussion of current events and controversial issues on the local, national, and international levels.

2. Service-learning projects that are designed to provide opportunities for students to apply what they learn.

3. Extracurricular activities that allow students to get involved outside of the classroom.

4. School governance that consists of meaningful student participation.

5. Simulations of democratic processes such as model legislature programs, Model United Nations, judicial competitions, and so on.

6. Classroom instruction in civics, government, history, economics, law, and related areas of study.

The Y's Youth and Government models vary from state to state. The participants of some programs come exclusively from local (facility) YMCAs, while other programs draw delegations from schools (both public and private) and even home-school groups. Though individual community or state programs may look different, as a general rule, all Y Youth and Government programs do well on the first three proven practices from the Civic Mission of Schools and perform exceptionally well on the fifth. Some Y Youth

and Government programs—for example, Georgia's Center for Civic Engagement, and similar programs in Kentucky, Tennessee, California, and other states—have developed additional resources that help educators deliver the sixth proven practice. Y Youth and Government programs even support the fourth proven practice because student participants emerge from them having found their voice in the governmental processes and with a desire to serve.

The Y's Youth and Government programming model is one that communities across the nation can use as a template for a private–public partnership to address the looming civic-knowledge crisis. The Y has developed resources to teach students the tenets of civics using methods that allow students to identify the problem, propose a solution, negotiate conflicting interests, and follow the established political procedure to see their proposal through to completion. Students learn the political process, how to communicate with others in small- and large-group settings, and more important, find their voice and realize they can make a difference. Nothing empowers students more than to realize the influence they have and exercise it for the good of their community.

Numerous studies have linked students' active participation in community or civic activities in their youth to their continued participation as adults (Kirlin, 2001, 2003a, 2003b; Menezes, 2003; Prentice, 2007). The investment community organizations make in offering programs that provide a safe environment and opportunities for youth to practice civic engagement is one that will yield dividends for generations to come. The Y and other community organizations can play a significant role in the development and implementation of such civic youth programs, and they can do so with a singleness of purpose that local schools often can't match.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of civic education is to create engaged citizens who can sustain democracy. If we accept the charge to educate Americans in citizenship, then community organizations have a responsibility to provide support to local schools in the form of time, treasure, and talent to ensure that students have the opportunity to participate in meaningful school- and community-based civic activities. Certainly, the challenges before the country are great—even overwhelming—but the United States is composed of people of incredible determination, strength, and resilience. U.S. citizens have deep within them an intrinsic ability to overcome the largest obstacles with great success. There is a growing body of evidence that the civic-knowledge crisis, too, can be overcome.

TIMING IS CRITICAL

To meet the challenge, timing is critical. Given the level of influence school has on the lives of the nation's youth, particularly in light of compulsory education, it behooves educators to make wise use of their time with students. Beaumont and Battisoni (2006) highlight the importance of time, saying, "the identity-forming years of young adulthood may be an especially potent period for political development" (p. 242). Citing a study based on the 1988 NAEP civics assessment, Galston (2007) shares findings that reveal "significant effects from the amount and timing of civic course work, the variety of topics studies, and the frequency with which current events are discussed" in the classroom (p. 638).

THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

The most important thing that a community organization can do is, simply, something. Most schools know they need and depend on external resources to accomplish their mission and will welcome such partners with open arms. Organizations looking to partner with schools should first call the local school to see what resources they lack. Then,

they can work with the school to develop a plan for how to meet those needs. Shiller (2013) suggests that, "in designing a program meant to engage urban youth in civic participation," community organizations should ensure the "program [is] authentic and participatory and staffed with adults who can successfully connect to young people" (p. 89). Many community organizations have ready access to programs and resources, such as the Y Youth and Government program. These can serve as a template and guide for developing youth programs that lead to meaningful experiences for students and to lasting impact in the community.

CREATING LASTING IMPACT

McBeth and Robison (2012) suggest that the most effective civic-education programs take the following into consideration: "1) students learn best through encountering the same concept in multiple ways, 2) most learning occurs outside the classroom, and 3) context is everything" (p. 274). Westheimer and Kahne (2004b) suggest that thoughtful analysis requires those who design curriculum and those who study its impact to be cognizant of and responsive to these important distinctions and their political implications. As is the case with other experiential civic-learning programs, curriculum and pedagogy have an enormous impact on outcomes (Kahne et al., 2006; Westheimer & Kahne, 2003).

Organizations like the Y already play a critical role in the community. They already have formed relationships with key stakeholders who can facilitate partnerships with schools to close the civic achievement gap through education. There is more at stake than test scores and students' knowledge of political systems and processes. The students of today are the workers, residents, and leaders of tomorrow. What is at stake is no less than the stability of our future community infrastructure. Community organizations have the resources, both financial and physical, to invest in schools and students to guide and support them

during the critical years of adolescent development. Knowledge is power, and civic knowledge will lead individuals to greater involvement in their community. By providing access to civic knowledge, the Y and other community organizations can close the civic achievement gap and create lasting and meaningful impact.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Certainly, Americans are blessed with many rights, opportunities, and possessions. In turn, we owe a debt of responsibility, obligation, and duty to the next generation. The Y is a perfect community partner to serve as a resource in the development of our most valuable resource—our youth.

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Trammell's post-secondary education began at Reinhardt University in Waleska, Ga., where he received an undergraduate degree in religious education and an MBA. In June 2014, Trammell received a doctorate in education with an emphasis on organizational management and leadership from Northeastern University in Boston, Mass. His dissertation is entitled "High School Students' Civic Knowledge and Sense of Civic Identity: A Quasi-Experimental Study of the Impact of Experiential Civic Learning Programs." As a result of Trammell's research and work around the topic of civic education, he has been placed on the Georgia State Board of Education's Civic-Education Task Force.