



Education Commission
of the **States**

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ECS Policy Brief Youth Legislative Engagement Initiative: An Overview of Effective Strategies to Design, Implement and Sustain Youth Legislative Initiatives

By Tiffani Lennon
July 2006

“More young Americans can name an American Idol winner and the city where the cartoon Simpsons live than know the political party of their state’s governor, according to a 2003 survey.”

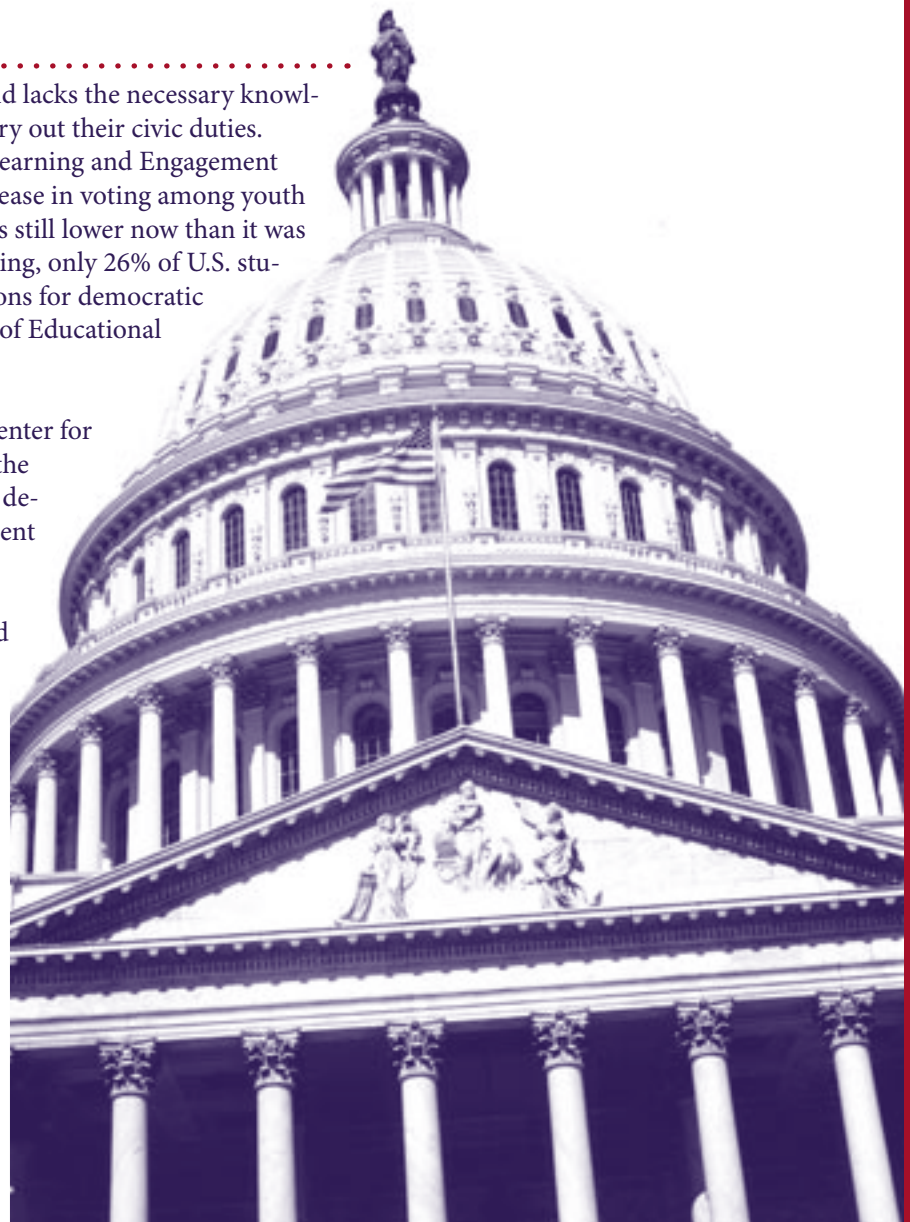
*~ Jan Goehring,
Engaging Young People in Legislatures. NCSL LEGISBRIEF¹*

INTRODUCTION

The U.S. faces a youth citizenry that is disengaged and lacks the necessary knowledge, skills and dispositions to participate in and carry out their civic duties. The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) has found that despite a considerable increase in voting among youth in the 2004 election, voting among 18-24-year-olds is still lower now than it was in the years prior to 1972.² Perhaps even more alarming, only 26% of U.S. students have proficient skills, knowledge and dispositions for democratic participation, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in Civics and Government.³

The Education Commission of the States National Center for Learning and Citizenship (ECS/NCLC) joined with the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) to develop and implement the Youth Legislative Engagement project. ECS/NCLC drew upon the experiences and expertise from collaborative partners in California, Maine, New Hampshire, Oregon, South Carolina and Wisconsin to develop a set of recommendations for engaging youth. This policy brief summarizes the state-level goals and accomplishments of this initiative and is intended for state policymakers, education leaders and youth engagement advocates.

The following pages outline a sustainable course of action, which will reverse the current trend of youth disengagement. The recommendations in this brief build cooperation between state legislators and students to enable students to develop civic competencies to contribute to our democracy now and in the future. The recommendations are based upon successful models found in Maine and Michigan and the experiences that have been implemented in the six partnering states.



FRAMING STATEMENTS

ECS/NCLC and NCSL designed and implemented the Youth Legislative Engagement Initiative based on the following principles:

- ◆ There is a national need to reverse the trend of youth disengagement by engaging students directly with policymakers and education leaders and provide authentic opportunities to acquire and apply civic competencies.
- ◆ The earlier young Americans are engaged in formal and informal democratic processes the greater the opportunity to acquire citizenship competencies.
- ◆ Schools have an obligation to integrate and sustain quality opportunities for students to acquire citizenship competencies.
- ◆ The more authentically connected students feel to the democratic process the more relevant these experiences are to their lives.
- ◆ Policymakers and education leaders can learn from students as well as provide quality opportunities for students to learn from their interactions with policymakers and education leaders.
- ◆ Education leaders and policymakers must welcome the voice of youth in developmentally age-appropriate ways.
- ◆ Recent research demonstrates that youth who learn and utilize civic and advocacy skills possess higher academic achievement rates than those who lack the skills.

The rationale for focusing on teachers, administrators and policymakers is two-fold:

1. Schools have a civic mission and this initiative provides an opportunity for legislators to help students engage in the political process.
2. Policymakers should engage young Americans to understand their contributions to policymaking and encourage their active roles as citizens.

BACKGROUND ON THE ECS NATIONAL INITIATIVE ON IMPROVING YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

ECS/NCLC and NCSL worked with six states to examine how they can engage youth by considering the model established by the Michigan House Civics Commission led by former state representative Doug Hart. As discussed in the January 2006 NCSL's LegisBrief, *Engaging Young People in Legislatures*:

The Michigan House Civics Commission is a bipartisan effort where legislators travel the state and conduct hearings with students about issues of concern to them. It is an opportunity for students to bring real ideas to legislators with the possibility that they will be introduced as bills. A group of 8th graders, for example, raised safety concerns about the overloaded backpacks students carry. Their testimony to commission members ultimately led to a resolution designating October as backpack safety month.

More than 50 Michigan public school districts participate, as well as private and charter schools. The initiative challenges youth to be involved citizens, building a foundation for civic engagement in the future. It also helps students and state policymakers communicate through direct engagement in the policymaking process. The components of the commission include:

- ◆ Students share legislative ideas with policymakers through written testimony, public hearings and direct interaction with state lawmakers. To illustrate, students prepare written testimony in their classes, submit the testimony to commission members at a school-based hearing, and orally present their legislative ideas at the hearing and follow-up with potential legislative sponsors.
- ◆ Curriculum aligned with the Michigan Curriculum Framework ensures that students gain the social studies knowledge and skills expected at each grade level and provides a guide to prepare for the hearings.

In this Report:

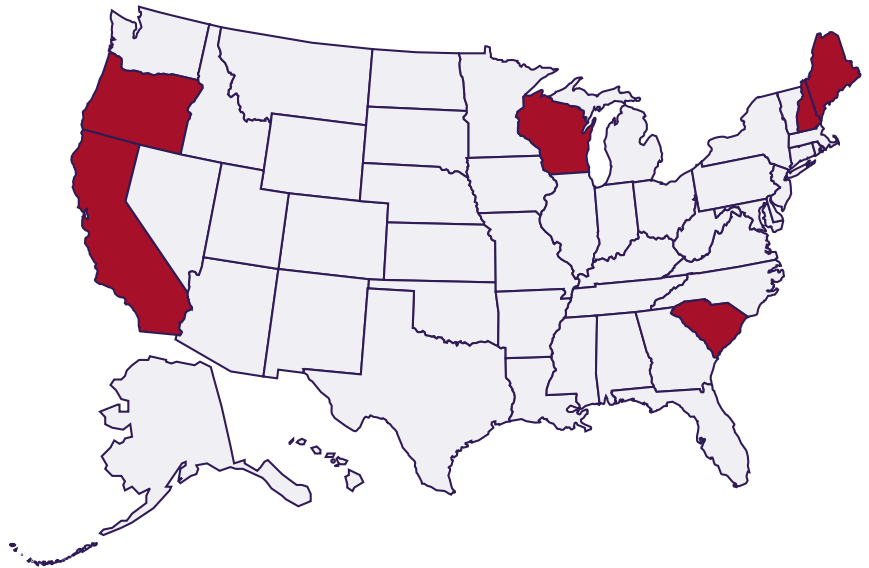
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- ◆ The commission's Web site provides information about the initiative, resources for students, and directions about how teachers or students can request a hearing.
- ◆ The availability of online legislative updates for students and teachers on issues pertinent to them.
- ◆ The creation of online poll questions for students.
- ◆ The availability of a capitol speakers' bureau for individuals to express the context, content and outcomes of the Michigan legislative and governmental processes available to classrooms.

ECS/NCLC worked in collaboration with the following states to consider, adopt or adapt elements of the Michigan House Civics Commission model:

- ◆ **California**
- ◆ **Maine**
- ◆ **New Hampshire**
- ◆ **Oregon**
- ◆ **South Carolina**
- ◆ **Wisconsin**

Each state committed to working with schools and state legislators to design and implement formal opportunities to engage students in policymaking. Collaboratively these states contributed to a set of strategies for schools and policymakers to consider. ECS has surveyed and compiled the results of the strategies and opportunities created by California, Maine, New Hampshire, Oregon, South Carolina and Wisconsin. The highlights from these states are discussed below in the state profiles.



POSITION STATEMENT

Education leaders need to create formal opportunities to enhance students' civic knowledge and skills, and integrate legislative opportunities into curricula and classes. To that end, the following profiles, challenges, lessons learned and recommendations are offered to education leaders and policymakers.

STATE PROFILES

The following state profiles provide information on strategies, activities, collaborations and progress on the implementation and sustainability of quality Youth Legislative Engagement Initiatives.

California

California focused on combining local youth legislative initiatives with a statewide Civic Mission of Schools campaign, adding value to each and implementing a scalability strategy. As a result of their initial efforts, the Stuart Foundation awarded a grant to plan/pilot the following activities:

1. Year-round youth-led research, deliberation and advocacy
2. A youth-led statewide organization to manage and direct the long-term initiative in partnership with adult allies
3. An annual cycle of events including recruitment, forums, research and deliberation, development of policy proposals, and education and advocacy on state and local levels
4. Support for Civic Mission of Schools Campaign in partnership with adult allies
5. Development of a civic engagement curriculum guide
6. Youth-produced media campaign to promote and document the initiative
7. An advisory council of youth leaders and adults representing partnering organizations
8. A communication strategy based on an interactive Web site created by WestEd
9. A comprehensive evaluation strategy including measuring increased civic participation, attitudes and knowledge.

Maine

The Maine Legislature established the Maine Legislative Youth Advisory Council in 2002. The purpose of the council – made up of four legislators and 18 youths – is to advise the legislature on issues that relate to youth. It is authorized to submit legislation.

The council has also reached out to young people in Maine. It has held forums on issues important to youth in schools across the state and included legislators from those regions. Similar to the model of the Michigan House Civics Commission, the council has worked with the Maine KIDS Consortium to offer teachers information to help students prepare their testimony for the council.

Maine established a Youth Legislative Council and is working on the following:

1. Integration with Maine's System of Learning Results: As part of the forthcoming review of Maine's System of Learning Results ("Learning Results") and the ongoing efforts to implement the comprehensive state and local assessment system required under the Learning Results, Maine policymakers and educators will integrate opportunities for real-life experiences and the development of civic participation skills throughout all content areas of the curriculum
2. The Maine Department of Education and Maine State Board of Education established a task force to advance the work of the Council. The Task Force on Citizenship Education has taken responsibility for implementation of many of the Council strategies
3. The Task Force on Citizenship Education has focused on identifying successful programs and fostering the spread of youth civic engagement initiatives across schools, communities and colleges in Maine
4. These efforts have engaged schools, communities and youth so that students graduate high school prepared for the 3 "Cs": college, career and citizenship. The Task Force on Citizenship Education has also been a staunch advocate for the continued existence and renewed legislative support for the Maine LYAC.
5. Pre-service educator preparation programs and post-certification training and guidance for educators. Maine policymakers, including state and local education agency officials, are providing greater support for educators and administrators in schools and colleges by integrating effective models and content-based strategies of citizenship education into pre-service educator preparation programs, post-certification training initiatives, and guidance for all teachers and administrators
6. Recognizing the importance of the civic mission of Maine's colleges and universities and creating citizenship engagement opportunities for Maine students
7. Creating shared responsibility and shared ownership of citizenship education
8. Engaging students in authentic experiences across the civic spectrum of their communities
9. Support for voter education and voter registration
10. Monitoring civic engagement
11. Convening a new task force to continue legislative initiatives.



New Hampshire

The New Hampshire Department of Education (NHDOE) has identified and met long-term goals that will be undertaken with regard to citizenship education in New Hampshire. Additionally, New Hampshire passed a civics requirement and legislation to develop a statewide Youth Advisory Council this year.

Community Partnerships

By focusing on community involvement and partnership, New Hampshire seeks to make available hands-on opportunities where young people can develop and increase applied skills. The NHDOE is part of the New Hampshire Alliance for Civic Engagement (NHACE) and considers all its members, as well as all educational leaders, to be stakeholders in this process. The NHDOE expects that new partnerships will be created as a result of the increasing NHACE membership. Increased membership is also expected through public forums and other connections to community partners. More specifically, New Hampshire's plan for increasing community partnerships includes:

1. Expanding service-learning practices throughout the state
 - ◆ Encouraging districts/schools to employ service-learning as an instructional method
 - ◆ Exploring public service as a vocation
 - ◆ Establishment of a K-16 Service-Learning Partnership.
2. Increasing training, including local partnership development; encouraging local education leaders to become involved; increasing participation in authentic learning, including but not limited to:
 - ◆ National student/parent mock election
 - ◆ Kids Voting
 - ◆ We the People Project
 - ◆ Project Citizen
 - ◆ Mock trial
 - ◆ Lawyer, judge or legislator in the schools
 - ◆ Youth in government.



Effective Leadership

In order for Youth Legislative Engagement Initiatives to work, effective leadership needs to exist.

1. Leadership will set the tone in support of citizenship education and:
 - ◆ Affirm the civic mission of schools
 - ◆ Promote state and local task forces to serve as stewards of community-connected citizenship education.
2. Leadership will raise the visibility of citizenship education statewide and:
 - ◆ Identify and evaluate existing standards for citizenship education (and create new standards if necessary)
 - ◆ Acknowledge the importance of student exposure and engagement in the political process as an important part of citizenship education
 - ◆ Commission efforts to explore state/district assessment options for citizenship education
 - ◆ Include articulation about connections with the community and the role of service-learning
 - ◆ Recognize and highlight the unique role and responsibility that social studies educators play in the delivery of citizenship education and the civic mission of schools.
3. Leadership will establish connections with other individuals and groups to support citizenship education throughout the state and:
 - ◆ Establish an influential network of leaders who can influence statewide in support of citizenship education
 - ◆ Develop alliances with municipal organizations, informal educators, parents, business leaders, elected officials, etc.

Media Campaigns

Media campaigns allow a clear, articulate message to influence the public. The message is essential because it builds awareness and community support. New Hampshire's plan includes:

1. Developing a message to enhance public understanding of citizenship education
2. Developing statewide marketing and media plan with a consistent public message
3. Ongoing communications/media partnerships, state publications (keep initiatives on the front burner)
4. Viewing as an opportunity for public engagement and awareness building
5. Encouraging school leaders to carry a consistent message in support of citizenship education across the board.

Standards, Assessment and Accountability

New Hampshire is seeking to solidify social studies as a core focus by creating a set of meaningful standards and assessments. In order for standards to have a positive impact, New Hampshire will include outcomes for political engagement. The state will also ensure that citizenship education standards are evaluated periodically, improved and upgraded.

New Hampshire is also developing and implementing a statewide assessment program aligned with citizenship education standards, and will include both quantitative and qualitative measures. The assessment will also include:

1. Adding new grade-specific assessment levels
2. Identifying, encouraging and supporting use of state-approved district assessments for citizenship education (local)
3. Encouraging and supporting use of common measures in district assessment of citizenship education tracking standards (and tracking those across state).

Student Involvement in Government and Leadership

Effective engagement requires experiential learning opportunities for students. New Hampshire is achieving this level of engagement by:

1. Encouraging districts/schools to provide increased opportunities
2. Promoting the viability of student leadership roles in schools and communities
3. Revising the New Hampshire School Board's rules regarding student government.

Oregon

The Oregon Commission for Voluntary Action and Service has taken the lead on an initiative based on the Maine legislative work with students, largely due to two legislators who approached the commission to develop the initiative. The legislators are committed to bringing additional state policymakers on board, through peer-to-peer deliberations and state forums.

The commission will sponsor a civic engagement conference bringing together education leaders, district policymakers and leaders, community organizations, teachers and students to formalize the Youth Legislative Engagement program at the end of 2006. This venue also provides an opportunity for legislators to develop an initiative for the upcoming legislative session. The intent is to support the initiative through legislation, infrastructure and support.



Current recommendations from Oregon include:

1. Engage legislators and governor's staff in the youth legislative program discussions
2. Link service-learning and civic engagement in training and staff development at state and local levels
3. Engage Oregon's "Bold and Courageous Leaders for Service and Citizenship" in the discussion with legislators
4. Provide opportunities for those leaders to promote service-learning and citizenship with school boards, administrators and other audiences.

South Carolina

The State Board of Education has approved a Student Advisory Council that will work with the board and track legislative issues. The students appointed to the board will have the opportunity to meet with legislators and learn about the process.

South Carolina initially focused only on K-12 youth but in the past year formed a Campus Compact to convene and deliberate on college/university students and legislative engagement.

Their achievements to date include:

1. Offering a pre-conference training on the Civic Mission of Schools at the state Council of Social Studies to secure teacher buy-in for the initiative
2. Convening community service and service-learning network
3. Ongoing reviews of social studies standards to establish a formal connection between the initiative and anticipated student competencies through standards-based curriculum
4. Revising state standards with the state board of education to identify other content standards that are consistent with the activities and outcomes of the initiative
5. Discussing district-level leadership by working with the South Carolina Association of School Administrators
6. Demonstrating the similarity of civic competencies with workforce knowledge and skills
7. Working with the Commission on Higher Education on citizenship and scholarships
8. Developing a Web-based curriculum guide with a focus on citizenship; the guide will be entitled S3 – Standards Support Site
9. Providing technical assistance to districts on utility of Web-based guide.

Wisconsin

Plans are in progress to work with a local high school to develop a Webpage that will focus on connecting students with current legislative issues. The Department of Public Instruction is working with the Department of Health and Family Services to form a youth advisory group, and a former state Senator will recruit legislators to work on this project. In addition, Wisconsin will be working with the Instructional Media and Technology team at the Department of Public Instruction to identify the school team to create the Webpage. A youth advisory group will be convened at the Youth Summit to provide ongoing feedback and assistance with identifying issues and developing content for the Web site.

Wisconsin focused on state leadership, local district participation and utilizing the state extension programs to advance youth legislative initiatives by:

1. Convening groups to review, assess and document use of NCLC products and suggest changes. Three were listed in the guide to state planning by ECS.
2. Measuring the success in advancing state policy and practice categorized in areas consistent with those identified by NCLC (student competencies, state policy options and service-learning). Wisconsin will conduct surveys to assess the following:
 - ◆ Number of school boards that include student representation
 - ◆ Number of teacher education programs that include citizenship and use service-learning as a teaching methodology (includes a Regents presentation)
 - ◆ Number of districts that have a separate citizenship education required course
 - ◆ Number of districts using service-learning as a teaching methodology (include anticipated outcomes of the service experience)
 - ◆ Number of districts using staff development dollars to support citizenship education and service-learning and the extent to which that is occurring
 - ◆ Which products/services include a citizenship/service-learning component so, as new DPI products are developed, they will include those components as appropriate.
3. Identifying and targeting stakeholders who will be involved and participate in improving civic education. The primary stakeholders include the state superintendent's Learning Lab on Service-Learning and Citizenship, the state superintendent's Collaborative Council, and the PK-16 Leadership Council.
4. Identifying community stakeholders who are interested in partnerships to ensure effective service-learning projects.
5. Developing citizenship competencies for grades K-12.
6. Developing effective standards and accountability.

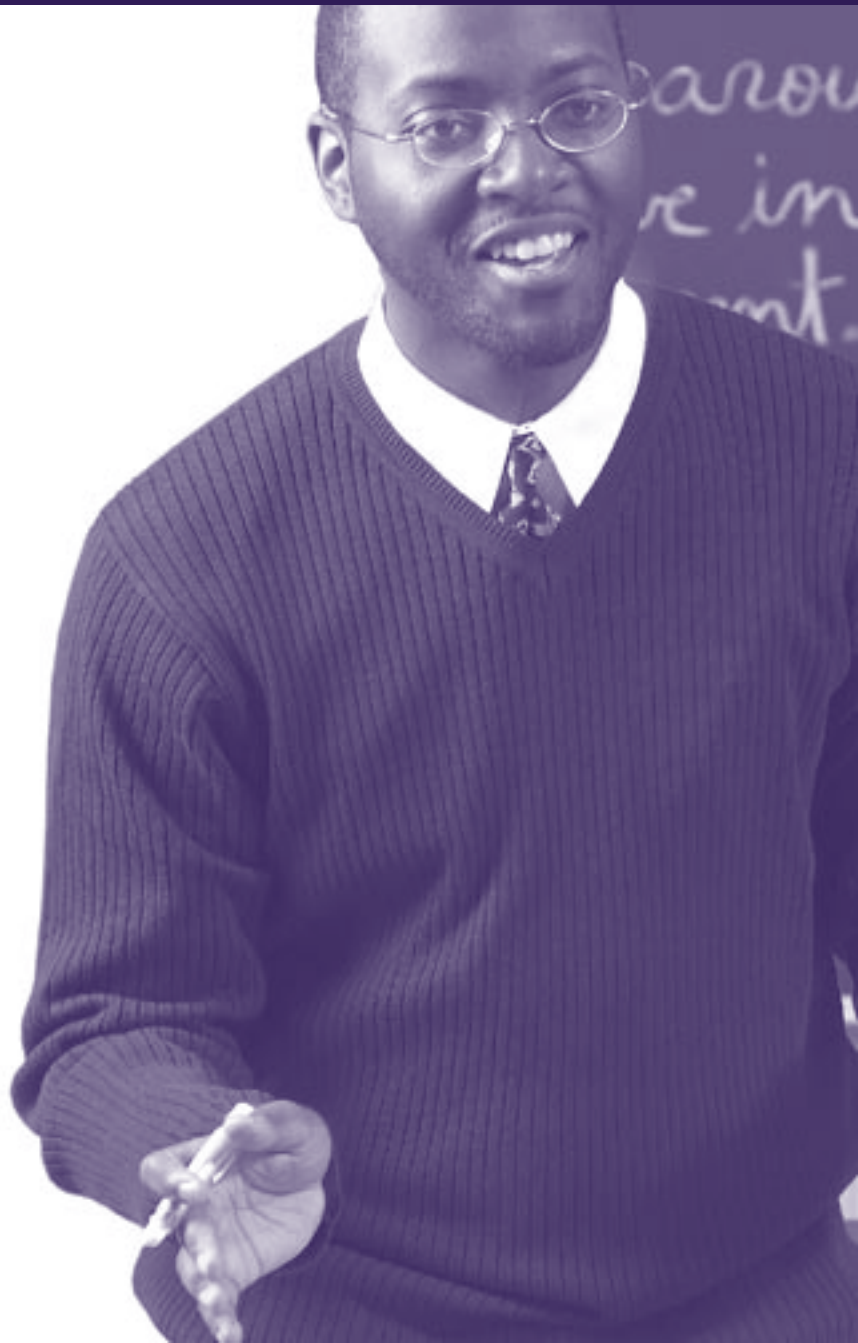
CHALLENGES

Through this collective set of work focusing on engaging students with policymakers and in policymaking, a number of common challenges emerged. These include:

- ◆ Designing and implementing authentic opportunities for students to engage with policymakers may compete with other initiatives
- ◆ Developing expectations of the positive role students can play in policymaking
- ◆ Engaging with school teachers to ensure youth policy forums align with school curriculum and assessments takes time and may be perceived as extracurricular rather than integral to teaching and learning
- ◆ Working with policymakers from all parties to engage youth, in an honest and bipartisan way, is a difficult venture for some policymakers
- ◆ Contributing to resources focused on youth requires policymakers to make supporting youth a high priority that competes with existing priorities
- ◆ Responding appropriately to youth and their policy recommendations requires policymakers to consider new strategies to address social issues
- ◆ Taking time to focus on youth requires a commitment to current and future civic contributions of young people.

These are all legitimate challenges that require policymakers' and education leaders' skills and will to overcome. However, policymakers should be concerned with the disengagement of young Americans from politics and policymaking, and commit to provide opportunities for them to understand their role as current and future citizens. Policymakers need to assist schools to achieve their civic mission; creating policies alone is insufficient.

Policymakers must also engage young people in authentic ways, aligned with school-based efforts and building on the concerns of youth. Young Americans must understand that our democracy requires their active, principled participation, and that engaging directly with policymakers is an appropriate strategy for them to acquire civic knowledge, skills and dispositions. The more our youth understand how our democracy operates the greater the opportunity for active participation.



LESSONS LEARNED

It is possible to engage a disengaged youth citizenry. Despite common challenges faced by many if not all partnering states, good policy, leadership and due diligence persisted. Some themes emerge that are common to most state plans for youth engagement. The themes include:

- ◆ Aligning the Youth Legislative Engagement Initiatives with education requirements, standards and student competencies
- ◆ Developing both long-term and short-term benchmarks and goals to establish bold visions and benchmarks to measure progress
- ◆ Establishing measurable outcomes for students and the initiative to ensure accountability to the initiative and all stakeholders
- ◆ Designing and aligning service-learning programs and projects that mutually focus on academic and civic competencies by addressing critical social issues
- ◆ Developing and delivering training for education leaders so that they gain the knowledge and skills to successfully implement and sustain quality youth legislative initiatives
- ◆ Creating and sustaining quality and long-term partnerships with the community so that the initiative has a positive impact on the community and the community views students in a more positive light
- ◆ Creating a media campaign to inform the public of the critical positive outcomes of the youth legislative engagement initiative
- ◆ Securing direct support, encouragement and rewards through budget allocations and making the initiative a high priority with policymakers, education leaders, schools and the community.

RECOMMENDATIONS BASED UPON STATE LESSONS

Involve Policymakers and Education Leaders

It is essential that state policymakers take responsibility for youth legislative initiatives, but it is just as essential for education leaders to help students become engaged citizens and develop civic knowledge and skills through classroom-based instruction and alignment with standards, curriculum and accountability. These skills include age-appropriate critical thinking, effective communication and negotiation. Giving education leaders strategies and tools to create a school civic climate conducive to youth engagement, establishing corresponding effective pedagogies and ensuring alignment with school priorities students is a critical first step to fostering youth voice and ownership.

Create Youth Legislative Opportunities

School administrators and curriculum directors are critical to the integration and sustainability of high-quality youth legislative activities. The following are sustainable goals for improved youth engagement:

- ◆ Involve youth in statewide and local deliberation and policymaking
- ◆ Encourage youth-led organization and initiatives
- ◆ Build youth-led opportunities into existing structure(s)
- ◆ Involve youth in service-learning professional development
- ◆ Develop coherent civic engagement curricula
- ◆ Develop quality indicators
- ◆ Assess and measure youth outcomes
- ◆ Convene national and state meetings.

SUMMARY

The Education Commission of the States National Center for Learning and Citizenship (ECS/NCLC) and the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) implemented the Youth Legislative Engagement Initiative to reverse the trend of civic disengagement among youth. This policy brief summarizes the state-level goals and accomplishments of this initiative and provides insights and suggestions for state policymakers, education leaders and youth engagement advocates.

Schools have a particular role to play to assist America's youth to gain the knowledge, skills and dispositions necessary for active principled citizenship. The Youth Legislative Engagement Initiative engages students in authentic, positive interactions with state policymakers to understand the policymaking process and encourage policy change to support social issues that are a concern to them.

If we are to sustain America's democracy we need to engage our youngest citizens in civic work for the public good. If we are not intentional about this critical responsibility, our youth will continue to feel disassociated from policymaking processes and not contribute to their communities and nation. The Youth Legislative Engagement Initiative offers strategies to engage policymakers and youth to ensure America's democracy continues to thrive and respond to the increasingly complex world we live in.

RESOURCES AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Tiffani Lennon is an assistant policy analyst, National Center on Service Learning and Citizenship, Education Commission of the States.

ENDNOTES

¹ Goehring, Jan, *Engaging Young People in Legislatures*. NCSL LEGISBRIEF (2004).

² CIRCLE, *Youth Voting Trends*, http://www.civicyouth.org/quick/youth_voting.htm

³ Kurtz, Karl, Rosenthal, Alan, Zukin, Cliff, *Citizenship: A Challenge for All Generations*, 19, National Conference of State Legislatures, <http://www.ncsl.org/public/trust/citizenship.pdf>, September 2003





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