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Issue Paper

Citizenship Education Policy at the School District Level

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Introduction

At a time when the ongoing effort to reform public education in the United States is significantly influenced by requirements of the federal No Child Left Behind Act, policymakers and education leaders at all levels are focused on improving student achievement in math and reading. The emphasis on these two areas, however, is making many educators, policymakers and public education advocates concerned that public education's historical function of training young people for democratic citizenship is being pushed aside.

While no one disputes that public education must provide students with the knowledge and skills they need to establish careers and participate in today's economy, many people argue that schools still must teach the skills and values students need to participate in community life and in local, state and national politics. In 2000, the National Study Group on Citizenship in K-12 Schools concluded in *Every Student A Citizen*:

If we do nothing to improve how students are educated for citizenship, we give up the ability to set the terms for the future of our children and, in the end, the nation. The opposite of doing nothing about citizenship education is not stasis. It is to concede that the disconnect Americans now experience as a problem will inevitably be a permanent condition. The decision to default is one the nation cannot afford. (p. 30)

During summer 2003, the Education Commission of the States' National Center for Learning and Citizenship (NCLC) invited 22 school districts across the country to complete surveys on their efforts to teach citizenship as part of a larger project examining the "line of sight" between state policy and school practice.¹ School districts represent a key leverage point in education policy because of their ability to mediate and interpret state and federal policy according to local conditions.

Districts were selected for this study based on recommendations from NCLC's national and state partners and on the center's previous work with some of the districts and their staffs. Fourteen of the 22 districts returned surveys. Respondents included small, rural districts, affluent suburban districts and two of the country's largest urban districts. The results are summarized below.

While the small number of districts included cannot represent the array of approaches to citizenship education in the roughly 15,000 U.S. school districts, the findings do provide useful information for district and state leaders seeking to support schools in preparing young people to participate in their communities and in the American democratic system of governance. The paper concludes with recommendations for policymakers to consider in designing and sustaining programs to prepare young people for citizenship.

Summary of Findings

The majority of survey respondents said citizenship education is important, and nearly all of them offer opportunities for students to acquire some of the knowledge and skills that effective citizens need. Most of the districts consider "citizenship education" to be a topic addressed through civics courses. When asked about the specific knowledge, skills and dispositions of citizenship, however, nearly all respondents described opportunities for students to obtain at least some civic competencies outside their civics courses.

Citizenship education is supported through state standards and local school board missions, with a number of districts also either requiring or expressing official support for the use of service-learning. These official policies are supported in a number of districts by local leaders' belief that civic engagement and involvement in the community are important qualifications for teachers and other education staff, by systems for shared decisionmaking among school and district staff, and by programs and unofficial opportunities for students to participate in district and school decisionmaking.

¹ Other products developed for this larger project include a 50-state database of state citizenship education policies, a policy brief based on information contained in the database and an issue paper describing 10 case studies of high schools providing high-quality citizenship education. All products are available on the NCLC Web site at www.ecs.org/NCLC.

Yet despite this apparent commitment to preparing young people to participate in democracy, few states have systems to assess whether these efforts truly are successful, and only half of the districts that answered the survey do any local assessment of students' citizenship competence.

Highlights from the survey follow, with more detail about the findings in the body of the paper. The categories under which the paper is organized represent one way a school district might coordinate its change efforts, but individual districts have to determine how best to organize their work. *Note that in some examples below, the total number of responses reported is less than 14. In these cases, one or more survey respondents did not answer a particular survey question.*

Curriculum and Instruction

- Ten of 12 districts report that district curriculum guidelines call for citizenship education to be taught in civics or other social studies courses. Two of those respondents added that district guidelines prescribe the teaching of citizenship in other areas as well.
- In seven of 12 districts, students learn about the role of the citizen by addressing community problems in civics or other social studies courses.
- Eleven of 14 districts report that their citizenship standards or requirements are not substantially different from their state standards and requirements, but only eight respondents view their states' academic standards as adequate in addressing the skills, knowledge and dispositions needed for effective citizenship. No respondents say their state standards are excellent.

School Board Policy

- Twelve of 13 school districts report citizenship is part of the district's mission, vision, objectives, strategic plan or local standards.
- Nine of 14 districts have school board policies relating to citizenship education, including district mission statements, strategic plans, service-learning and civics policies.
- Three of 14 districts have a service-learning graduation requirement, while three others have passed school board policies supporting the use of service-learning in their schools.

Leadership

- Eight of 13 districts consider competency in citizenship education or a belief in its importance when hiring teachers.
- Twelve of 14 districts report that democratic governance at the building and district levels is supported through shared decisionmaking, with eight districts citing site-based management as a specific example.

Civic Knowledge, Skills and Dispositions

The National Center for Learning and Citizenship (NCLC) believes a student needs civic skills and dispositions, as well as civic content knowledge to be an engaged citizen. Civic knowledge, skills and dispositions should build on and reinforce one another, beginning in early childhood, and be seen as approximately equal in importance. Many, but not all, of these competencies already exist in state and local standards for civics. They also can be fostered through both school-related and out-of-school experiences (in family or neighborhood). Therefore, it is important that schools and communities work together to determine the civic competencies most important to them. Below are some examples of civic competencies a community might seek to cultivate among its citizens.

Civic-related knowledge (both historical and contemporary)

- Understanding of historical conflicts over the meaning of the constitution
- Understanding of the role of media in a democracy
- Knowledge of the ways ordinary citizens can act and have acted in the past to create change
- Knowledge of local community assets, problems and important local actors, and their connection to broader issues.

Cognitive and participative skills (and associated behaviors)

- Ability to understand, analyze and check the reliability of information about government from media sources and political communications
- Ability to articulate the meaning of abstract concepts such as democracy and patriotism
- Ability to express one's opinion on a political or civic matter when contacting an elected official or media outlet
- Ability to envision a plan for action on community problems and to mobilize others.

Dispositions (motivations for behavior and values/attitudes)

- Patriotism and commitment to American democracy
- Support for justice, equality and other democratic values and procedures
- Respect for human rights and a willingness to search out and listen to others' views
- Personal commitment to the well-being of others in the community and nation.

For more information about civic competencies, see *Developing Citizenship Competencies from Kindergarten through Grade 12: A Background Paper* by Judith Torney-Purta and Susan B. Vermeer, published 2004 by the Education Commission of the States' National Center for Learning and Citizenship.



Assessment and Accountability

- Four of 14 districts assess citizenship through state standardized tests, while seven districts use other means. Four districts report that citizenship is not assessed.

- Eleven of 14 districts report that student demonstration of proficiency in citizenship is not a requirement for promotion.

Civic Education and Civic Engagement

Evidence indicates that young people are graduating from high school with little knowledge of or interest in government and political affairs. According to the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), nearly one-third of high school seniors demonstrated a lack of basic understanding of how American government works in the 1998 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Civics Assessment (see *The Civic Mission of Schools*, p. 19). Three-fourths of students who took the NAEP exam received a “basic” or “below basic” score.

In addition, today’s students appear disinclined to participate in the public policy decisions that affect their lives. In presidential election years between 1972 and 2000, for example, the national voter turnout rate among 18- to 24-year-olds declined by 13% (Levine and Lopez, 2002).

As civic knowledge and participation among young people has slipped, the curriculum in American public schools has included fewer requirements for civic education. Between 1988 and 1998, the proportion of 4th graders who reported taking social studies daily fell from 49% to 39% (NAEP, 1998, p. 15). According to *The Civic Mission of Schools*:

Although the percentage of students enrolled in at least one high school government course has remained fairly constant since the late 1920s, most formal civic education today comprises only a single course on government – compared to as many as three courses in civics, democracy and government that were common until the 1960s. The traditional “civics” course used to emphasize the rights and responsibilities of citizens and ways that they could work together and relate to government.

“Problems of democracy” involved discussions of public policy issues. The “government” class (which remains common today) describes and analyzes government in a more distant way, often with little explicit discussion of a citizen’s role.

While civic education requirements have decreased, many schools have expanded the use of community service to teach students about the responsibilities of citizenship. These service activities, however, tend to be one-time or short-term experiences not designed to help students understand the underlying causes of the community needs they are addressing, or the political conditions that may contribute to such needs. Furthermore, these limited service experiences do not appear to foster continued civic engagement once young people leave school. According to Lopez (2004), while the proportion of college freshmen who report having volunteered in high school is increasing, the volunteer experiences they have had are generally episodic (once a month or less), rather than regular activities. And according to data from the U.S. Department of Education’s National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988, which followed a cohort of more than 10,000 students through 2000, volunteerism among members of this group peaked at 41% at about age 20 (when many were in college), but had dropped to 33% six years later (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003).

Despite these gloomy numbers, there are places where students are given a variety of opportunities to acquire not only civic knowledge, but also the skills needed for effective citizenship and the encouragement to get involved. School districts across the country are demonstrating that the academic and civic missions of public education are not mutually exclusive.

Curriculum and Instruction

NCLC supports a vision of high-quality citizenship education through which students acquire knowledge of government and political systems; civic skills, such as the ability to understand how public policy decisions are made and the ability to participate in or influence those decisions; and civic dispositions, such as a belief in the importance of representative democracy and a willingness to get involved in community decisionmaking. (For more information on civic knowledge, skills and dispositions, see Torney-Purta and Vermeer.) Education for citizenship is not the sole responsibility of civics teachers; all

teachers can provide opportunities for students to learn participatory skills and democratic values.

Yet, as highlighted above, 10 of 12 districts surveyed report that district guidelines require citizenship to be taught in civics or other social studies courses. Respondents from only three districts say citizenship is taught outside the social studies. All 12 of these districts indicate that students learn about state government in civics, government or other social studies courses, and 10 of the 12 say students learn about local government in civics or other



social studies courses. Only seven of these 12 districts, however, report that students learn in these courses about “the role of the citizen in solving community problems or making positive changes in the community.”

In seven districts, respondents say students learn about the role of the citizen through other courses or, more commonly, through service-learning.² One respondent from the Los Angeles Unified School District said the role of the citizen is not currently part of the curriculum and noted, “This is why we are adding a service-learning requirement.”

Yet when asked about specific civic skills (such as debating issues, synthesizing information, group leadership, public speaking and persuasive writing) and dispositions (such as respect for others’ beliefs and ideas, public spiritedness, and belief in consensus and collaboration), some respondents identified opportunities for students to acquire such competencies beyond civics and social studies courses. Dale Kinsley, superintendent of the Bellingham Public Schools in Washington, pointed to his district’s English/language arts curriculum for some of the civic skills listed, and indicated that many civic dispositions are part of the elementary curriculum, which emphasizes such values as getting along with others and being involved in the community.

Not surprisingly, the majority of districts surveyed count state standards and graduation requirements as important influences on the citizenship curriculum. Only three of the 14 districts have citizenship education course requirements or standards that are different from state requirements. Yet respondents from five of these districts say their state standards are less than adequate in addressing the knowledge, skills and dispositions necessary for effective citizenship. One respondent reported no state standards to support citizenship education (though the state, in fact, does have such standards). The other respondents say their state standards are adequate in this regard. Not a single respondent rated his or her state’s standards as “excellent” in addressing citizenship knowledge, skills and dispositions.

With respect to the influence of various parties on the citizenship education curriculum, 11 of 13 respondents (85%) said district administration has either “some influence” or “significant influence” over the curriculum, followed by individual teachers and building principals (77%), and school boards and district curriculum directors (62%). Four respondents (31%) said the state education agency has “little or no influence” over the citizenship curriculum.

The superintendent of one of these districts, Shelley Berman of the Hudson (Massachusetts) Public Schools, said: “The state has significantly de-emphasized civics in the state standards. We are making it central to our local curriculum.”

Yet although they cite district personnel as having the most influence over the curriculum, respondents acknowledge that most districts embrace state standards and graduation course requirements. This apparent contradiction may be explained by district leaders’ view of state requirements as minimum guidelines that may be interpreted differently by individual districts. State standards prescribe the knowledge that students must be able to demonstrate, while course requirements often prescribe little in the way of content. Thus, while standards and course requirements lay out a framework for instruction, in most cases it is left to districts, schools and individual teachers to determine how to meet those requirements.

The school districts in this study use a variety of curricular and co-curricular approaches to provide students with opportunities to practice citizenship skills. Mock trials and mock elections are used in most of the districts, although it isn’t known how often these strategies are used. All districts report using service-learning, with most using this methodology across all grades. But the frequency of such opportunities for students varies across districts, with only a few appearing to use service-learning routinely.

Survey respondents mentioned a variety of civics and citizenship-related programs developed by external organizations, as well as local agencies. These include programs from the Center for Civic Education, the Close Up Foundation, the Constitutional Rights Foundation, Project 540, Street Law, First Vote, Future Problem Solvers/Community Problem Solvers, Kids Voting USA, Character Counts, Teen Court, Model U.N., Project Ignition, First Amendment Schools and others.

The choice of instructional materials is influenced by both state and local decisions. Respondents from seven districts say decisions about instructional materials for civics or citizenship education are based on state-mandated adoption lists. But state adoption lists are not the only factor; 12 districts report district curriculum committees make decisions about curriculum resources as well. Other important decisionmakers are high school departments, school curriculum committees and, of course, individual teachers.

² Service-learning is a teaching methodology, which involves students in service to their communities in ways that provide students with opportunities to meet specific learning objectives. For a more detailed definition, see the National Service-Learning Clearinghouse.



School Board Policy

School boards usually maintain a mission and/or vision statement and a strategic plan containing specific goals, objectives and strategies. Many districts include in their mission or vision language about the importance of preparing young people for citizenship.

Examples from the districts surveyed include:

- "... to become responsible, contributing citizens" (Boulder Valley [Colorado] Public Schools)
- "... to equip each individual for lifelong learning, responsible citizenship and productivity in an ever-changing world" (Richland School District Two, Columbia, South Carolina)
- "... become a useful and responsible member of home, community and society" (Nestucca Valley School District #101, Hebo, Oregon)
- "... to guarantee that each student acquire the skills and knowledge to become a successful individual and a responsible citizen" (Waterford [Connecticut] Public Schools).

Many other districts, however, do not have language about citizenship in their missions or vision statements. The largest urban districts surveyed – Chicago and Los Angeles – emphasize academic achievement and individual development rather than community membership or responsible citizenship. In Los Angeles, "The teachers, administrators and staff of the Los Angeles Unified School District believe in the equal worth and dignity of all students and are committed to educate all students to their maximum potential." In Chicago: "The Chicago Public Schools will ... [provide] all our students and their families with high-quality instruction, outstanding academic programs and comprehensive student development supports to prepare them for the challenges of the world of tomorrow." While mission statements do not always guide an organization's day-to-day work, they do communicate publicly what the leadership believes is important.

School boards also convey their priorities through strategic plans. Several districts in this study include citizenship-oriented goals and strategies in their planning documents. For example, the first four instructional goals for 2003-04 for the Hudson (Massachusetts) Public Schools relate to citizenship:

- Strengthening the integration of character education in the curriculum, pre-K-12, by continuing to emphasize Hudson's core values of empathy, ethics and service
- Expanding and enhancing the understanding and integration of community service-learning into the curriculum
- Expanding the instruction of social skill and ethical development through such programs as Second Step, multi-age grouping or looped classrooms, "Responsive Classroom" strategies, conflict resolution skills, peer leadership or peer mediation, etc.
- Increasing student participation in class and school governance through class meetings, active student councils, forms of school governance that engage all students in dialogue and the development of "Responsive Schools."

Some of Hudson's other instructional goals target specific teaching and assessment practices that can support a citizenship orientation:

- Implementing inquiry-based strategies for teaching social studies that develop a critical understanding of the social and political world
- Expanding the use of such multiple forms of assessment as portfolios and other forms of alternative and authentic assessment for informing teaching practices, evaluation and reporting student progress to parents.

Three of the districts surveyed have passed school board resolutions supporting service-learning, and three districts maintain service-learning graduation requirements. The board of the Jemez Valley Public Schools, in New Mexico's Jemez Pueblo, adopted in 2001 a resolution that states, in part, that service-learning "meets the district's goals of helping to develop youth as contributing citizens and allows the opportunity for youth to be seen as resources in their communities."

The Chicago Public Schools requires students to complete 40 hours of service-learning to graduate. Among the expected outcomes of this requirement are: "Increase the civic and citizenship skills of students"; "expose students to societal inadequacies and injustice, and empower students to remedy them"; and "help students learn how to get things done."

Leadership

An important part of any district leader's job is communicating his or her vision and priorities. District leaders can support citizenship education by clearly communicating its importance to staff and faculty, students and the community, even when specific board policies supporting those priorities do not exist. Bill Hughes, superin-

tendent in Greendale, Wisconsin, points out: "The superintendent of schools must set the tone and support the expectation of citizenship education." Accordingly, Hughes leads a yearly workshop for new teachers in citizenship education and service-learning. More than 30% of the district's current faculty have participated. Hughes also



requires his principals to include a service-learning goal in their annual performance reviews.

Another way superintendents and school boards communicate their priorities is in the hiring of staff. Eight of 13 survey respondents say competency in citizenship education or a belief in its importance is considered in teacher hiring decisions. Randy Collins, superintendent in Waterford, Connecticut, says he hired one applicant for a civics position over another candidate with more seniority because the junior applicant had taught a “problems-of-democracy” course. When hiring a service-learning coordinator, Collins sought candidates with a “citizenship orientation.”

District leaders also can convey their belief in the value of democratic decisionmaking by establishing a management structure that encourages shared leadership. Twelve of the districts surveyed report democratic governance at the building and district levels is supported through shared decisionmaking, with eight districts citing site-based management as a specific example.

In all of the districts surveyed, leadership opportunities are available through student government. In Hudson, a new high school was built to facilitate all students’ participation in school governance through regular meetings of student subgroups called “clusters.” Ten of the districts surveyed have student advisory groups working with the principal in at least some schools, and 10 districts include student seats on school site councils.

Half of the districts include student seats on school board committees, and five include students as nonvoting mem-

bers of the school board. None of these districts, however, allows students to serve as full, voting members of the school board. Other opportunities for student leadership cited by respondents include parent-teacher-student organizations, student-led parent-teacher conferences, student advisory groups to the superintendent, and opportunities for student participation in hiring and strategic planning committees and school improvement councils.

The survey data offered no clear patterns in the ways responsibility for citizenship education is assigned at either the building or district level. In four districts, the director of curriculum and instruction is responsible, while assistant superintendents are named in three surveys. A variety of other people are listed in the remaining surveys, with more than one person named in several districts. One large urban district reports that although many opportunities exist for students to acquire citizenship skills, no one is responsible for citizenship education at the district or building level.

Hudson Superintendent Berman says citizenship education in his district is everyone’s responsibility. The district is organized to support students’ moral and civic development through democratic governance and opportunities for service to the community, and teachers and other district staff are aware of their responsibilities. In school systems, however, that do not so clearly articulate the goal of effective democratic citizenship, and in which no one is held accountable for the district’s success or failure in producing effective citizens, results of any efforts are likely to remain unclear.

Assessment and Accountability

Assessment of citizenship skills and dispositions is not as straightforward as assessment of student knowledge. Some civic skills can be assessed in traditional ways, such as paper-and-pencil tests, including the ability to determine bias in a newspaper article or a piece of campaign literature, take and defend a position, or even make a decision about a particular public policy issue based on the merits of the arguments. Other skills, such as leadership ability and conflict resolution, are harder to test on paper. Civic dispositions – such as willingness to participate in a public dialogue about a particular public policy issue – also can be difficult to measure through traditional assessments.

Districts in the NCLC survey reported only limited assessment of “citizenship.” In fact, four districts have no assessment of citizenship at all. The survey question on this issue, however, did not refer to assessment of specific civic knowledge, skills and dispositions, which may have influenced the responses. (As noted above, many of the

attitudes and behaviors needed to participate in a community *are* taught at the elementary levels, and elementary teachers are trained to assess student development in these areas.)

In addition, because state accountability systems must accommodate so many students, the type of information such systems can process must be managed. The simplest way to do this is by focusing state tests on what is most easily assessed – student knowledge. And because schools are held accountable by states for student knowledge, it should not be surprising that they spend more time ensuring students do well in that area than they do on cultivating civic skills and dispositions.

Also, because No Child Left Behind requires testing student knowledge in reading and math – and not in the social studies – states now may be even less likely to hold schools accountable for students’ civic knowledge, much less their citizenship qualities. Indeed, only four school dis-



districts report that citizenship is included on their state tests. This factor bears out the findings of NCLC's 50-state policy scan which indicated there is very little alignment between citizenship education standards, assessment and accountability at the state level.³

Assessment of students' civic skills and dispositions may be more likely at the district level, and the districts in this study offer some useful models. For example, students graduating from the Bellingham Public Schools in 2006 and thereafter must complete a culminating project that includes a community component. The Jemez Valley Public Schools already require students to complete a "senior exhibition" that includes a portfolio demonstrating what they have learned. The service-learning resolution passed by the Jemez Valley school board includes a

statement recommending exhibits based on students' service-learning experiences be included in their portfolios.

The long-term outcomes of citizenship education can be difficult for schools to measure. Yet the Hudson schools are attempting to do just that, and have begun working with Hudson's town clerk to examine trends in voting behavior among the area's 18- to 24-year-olds over the last five years. Hudson also is beginning a three-year evaluation of its democratic governance model in the high school. Both of these efforts should provide district leaders with important information about whether their efforts to build students' civic skills and dispositions, especially a commitment to voting, are working.

Community Partnerships

Citizenship education should be seen as a strategy for teaching young people not just about American history and some far-off government over which they have little influence, but also about the roles they can play in improving their communities. To provide opportunities to learn these roles, it is important for school districts to establish partnerships with local government agencies and community-based organizations. Many of the districts that completed the NCLC survey have partnerships with external civic groups or institutions of higher education to support their citizenship efforts. These districts have found service-learning provides many opportunities for collaboration with outside groups. Organizations cited include Partners in Education, Industry Education Councils, the Scottish Rite Center, VFW, Kiwanis, Rotary, Wal-Mart, police departments and the courts.

Such partnerships benefit both students and the community. According to Susan Abravanel, education director at

SOLV in Oregon, school-community partnerships around service-learning can benefit community-based organizations by providing a base of volunteers who may continue volunteering even after a service-learning project ends. These partnerships also can reduce mistrust between community and school by helping community members understand state standards and assessment, and by involving them in helping students meet those standards, she says.

Service-learning can serve as an intermediate strategy that brings schools and communities together. Once this happens, schools can begin involving students – with their adult allies – in public policy decisions that provide opportunities for students to learn civic skills that will equip them to participate in the political process throughout their lives.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Citizenship education is taking place in virtually all American public school districts. Beginning in elementary school, students learn how to resolve conflict, how to choose wisely among alternatives and how to contribute effectively to group deliberations. School districts' use of service-learning is helping cultivate a sense of civic duty and an orientation toward activism. Student government, co-curricular and extracurricular activities provide students with leadership opportunities and a sense of efficacy. And, of course, schools provide many classroom

opportunities for students to acquire knowledge of local, state and U.S. history and government.

The school districts in this study have initiated a number of programs, policies and processes designed to support citizenship education that can serve as examples for other districts. These range from simply providing flexibility in scheduling to facilitate community-based learning opportunities, to the development of a community-generated list of desired character traits that is incorporated into lessons

³ See the NCLC Web site for resources related to this issue, especially the State Policies for Citizenship Database, the StateNote titled "State Citizenship Education Policies" and the policy brief titled "State Policies to Support Citizenship Education."



districtwide, to the requirement that staff candidates demonstrate an orientation toward citizenship before being hired. These districts have created citizenship courses, established culminating project requirements that include community-based learning, added students to the school board and, in one case, completely redesigned the high school to facilitate teacher and student participation in school governance.

Yet what appears to be lacking in most of the districts in our study is an explicit articulation of the connection between the civic knowledge, skills and dispositions acquired in school on the one hand, and the obligations of citizenship on the other. Citizenship education has not been approached in a systematic way in these and likely other school districts. With this in mind, NCLC recommends the following steps for **district leaders**:⁴

- 1. Include teachers (including those outside of the social studies), parents, students and other community members in decisions about what civic knowledge, skills and dispositions the schools should teach.** Provide opportunities for students to fully participate in this process.
- 2. Conduct an audit of the district curriculum (including courses outside the social studies) to determine where and how the community's agreed-upon competencies are being taught.** Where gaps are identified, the school district and the community can begin to develop a plan to provide opportunities for students to acquire those competencies both in school and in the community. Include in the plan mechanisms for providing teacher professional development, an accountability system, a list of committed partners and their roles, and a "chain of command" to ensure someone is responsible for ensuring that students have access to the opportunities they need to acquire civic competencies.
- 3. Communicate clearly to the community and district staff that citizenship education is a priority.** This can be done through position announcements and hiring, performance reviews, professional development opportunities, involvement of students and teachers in district decisionmaking, and other means.
- 4. Encourage building principals to establish citizenship education committees** to ensure teachers and students feel ownership over decisions about the citizenship education and the curriculum.

Building administrators are as important as district leaders in moving a school district toward more effective citizenship education. They can demonstrate a commitment to democratic processes and set an example for teachers

and students by encouraging input on decisions about the citizenship education curriculum, as well as school governance. Principals can support teachers by offering time for professional development provided by outside experts and by the teachers themselves through collaborative planning. More specifically, school principals and other building-level leaders can support districtwide efforts to promote citizenship education in the following ways:

- 1. Bring teachers together to assess the extent to which the current curriculum provides opportunities for students to gain civic knowledge, skills and dispositions,** and develop a schoolwide plan to address competencies not currently being taught.
- 2. Encourage community-based learning by permitting some flexibility in the school day and supporting collaboration among teachers.** Invite community members into the school to share their knowledge and to use students as resources.
- 3. Provide opportunities for student leadership and participation in school policy decisions** through such means as student government, student-led parent-teacher conferences, and opportunities to serve on site councils and principal advisory boards.
- 4. Provide support for teachers in all disciplines to participate in professional development opportunities that will enhance their citizenship education skills.**
- 5. Encourage teachers to move beyond one-time service projects** and make ongoing service-learning opportunities that address the root causes of community problems an expectation of teachers and students.

While much of the work of improving the way schools educate young people for citizenship falls on the shoulders of local stakeholders, state policymakers and education leaders can make this work easier by ensuring that state policies acknowledge that citizenship education is part of the mission of public education, and that state program mandates and accountability requirements do not limit schools' ability to achieve this mission. In addition, **state education leaders** may wish to consider the following strategies:

- 1. Examine state civics and social studies standards to ensure they clearly convey the importance of civic skills and dispositions, as well as civic knowledge.**
- 2. Examine existing state policies to determine their effects on student civic engagement** (e.g., policies allowing minors to serve as volunteer poll workers), and consider sponsoring legislation or developing statewide programs to provide such opportunities.⁵

⁴ Recommendations for local governments, elected officials and schools of education, as well as additional recommendations for schools, districts and state policymakers, can be found in the NCLC publication, "Citizenship Education in 10 U.S. High Schools."

⁵ The NCLC's 50-state citizenship education policy database may be helpful here.



3. **Incorporate concepts contained in state citizenship standards into state reading and writing assessments**, and provide professional development to help teachers meet these standards.
4. **Incorporate school-community partnerships and local assessment of students' citizenship competencies into the state's accountability system.**

The process of bringing schools and communities together to discuss core civic values and skills may seem daunting, but NCLC's work in this area indicates consensus on these values is not as elusive as one might think. State civics standards can provide a useful starting point, and

the NCLC publication, *Developing Citizenship Competencies from Kindergarten through Grade 12: A Background Paper* (Torney-Purta and Vermeer), may help in preparing for this process. It is important for educators to engage local community members in this discussion because their cooperation in providing learning opportunities for students is essential. By making a commitment to citizenship education, local school districts, as the unit of government closest to most American citizens, can play a vital role in reinvigorating civic engagement and American democracy.

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The Education Commission of the States (ECS) National Center for Learning and Citizenship (NCLC)

The ECS National Center for Learning and Citizenship (NCLC) assists state and district policymakers and educators who are developing policies that support K-12 school-based service-learning opportunities. These educational experiences help students acquire the skills, values, knowledge and practice necessary to be effective citizens. NCLC identifies and analyzes policies and practices that support effective citizenship education, creates and disseminates publications for education stakeholders, and convenes meetings to develop a collective voice for citizenship education and civic mission of schools. NCLC also encourages policy support and system structures to integrate service-learning into schools and communities. For more information, contact Terry Pickeral, NCLC executive director, 303.299.3636 or visit www.ecs.org/nclc.



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