RETURNING TO OUR ROOTS

EDUCATING FOR DEMOCRACY



A CONCEPT PAPER ON YOUTH CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Written with support from the Ford Foundation and
the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation

By Generation Citizen

(With support from The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning & Engagement (CIRCLE), the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, the Spencer Foundation, and the UCLA Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access (IDEA) at the Graduate School of Education and Information Sciences)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

"Democracy needs to be re-born in each generation and education is its mid-wife."

John Dewey



There may not be a more powerful sentiment than the notion that every person, regardless of race, class, or background, has the same say over the direction of the United States of America. But despite this promise of the ideal democracy, our country currently faces significant social and economic challenges: an inefficient and inadequate health care system, an unequal education system, crumbling infrastructure, a governmental process dominated by special interests, and waning natural resources. These issues, and countless others, make it increasingly evident that our democracy—driven by our broken political system—is not working for the vast majority of the American people. Our democracy is in crisis, and its future is uncertain. Amidst all these challenges, the question becomes how to ensure that, once again, the quest for a more perfect union becomes one answered by the actual people in the American democracy. The answer starts with ensuring our young people can take the reigns of our democracy.

Underpinning all of these challenges is **persistent and growing economic, political, social, and cultural inequality.** Income inequality in the United States exceeds that of any other democracy in the developed world and is growing rapidly: the share of the total U.S. wealth owned by the bottom 90 percentile of families has decreased dramatically in the last ten years. But it is not just economic inequality that affects the American experience. We have also seen increasing political inequality, as measured by the clout and power of different groups, often along lines of wealth, income, gender, and/or race. Educational inequality, measured by variance in the quality and access to educational opportunities, has also increased in recent years; leaving behind the country's most vulnerable populations, and weakening America's overall democracy. In turn, it has become our collective responsibility to work towards a system in which these inequalities do not exist.

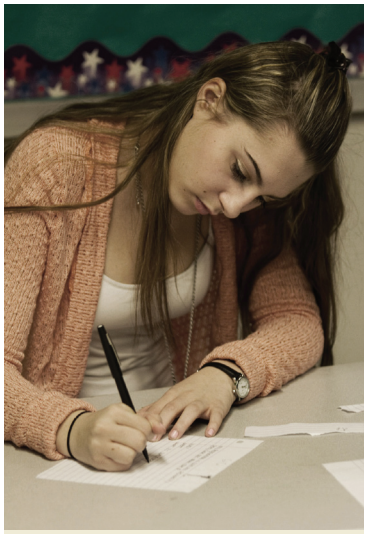
Combatting this rising inequality and reviving our democracy will require a host of different levers and solutions; among them real economic and social policy change, a shifting narrative of the necessity of keeping America's promise alive for all its people, and increased investment in public goods, such as our education system. **Paramount amongst these solutions is educating and empowering our young people with the knowledge and skills that will allow them to become informed and active citizens capable of making positive changes in their own lives, and for the collective good.** This has never been more critical than it is now, in an age in which youth political engagement is at its lowest levels in recent history.

[1] "Forget the 1%." The Economist. The Economist Newspaper, 8 Nov. 2014.

(It should be noted that political engagement, for the purposes of this paper, is defined as interaction with power, and specifically, governmental institutions. Additionally, is important to note that the concept of "citizenship" has overt political connotations, as the recent immigration debates demonstrate. Political participation is about more than just voting, and thus, a necessary component to revitalizing democracy education is reclaiming the use of the word citizen. All individuals residing in this country, regardless of background or official documents, should have the opportunity to participate and impact the political process through their words and actions. We feel the need to reclaim the word citizen to mean all people, rather than solely legally recognized individuals.)

The concept for this paper emerged during a convening at the Ford Foundation in January 2015, entitled "Educating for Democracy", wherein more than 100 scholars, practitioners, philanthropists, and youth met to discuss the critical gap between education and civic engagement. This paper explains the importance of democracy education—the discipline of teaching young people how and why to be politically and civically active by participating in and influencing institutions and exercising leadership and activism in their communities—and describes why building a field for the discipline is vital, especially in our current political times.

We argue that every young person in this country should receive an effective democracy education, providing them with the knowledge and skills necessary to become informed and active civic actors and leaders. Research demonstrates that such education allows for skills-building and academic engagement in young people, improves public institutions, and, ultimately, can help create a more equitable country in which a more comprehensive body of voices is represented in decision-making. The paper also argues why we must make current efforts to strengthen, expand, and institutionalize democracy education, creating and defining a veritable democracy education field, particularly for youth who are typically excluded from such opportunities and who are disproportionately low-income children and/or youth of color. While we inherently know a democracy requires active civic participation and has disparate approaches to engaging young people in politics, we will only make progress if we can demonstrate why democracy education matters, the multiple ways in which it can be implemented across the country, and how it can be customized to meet community needs. We have the ingredients to make actionable change. We posit that current political and educational realities make now the time to collectively and cohesively activate them.



Every young person in this country should receive an effective democracy education.

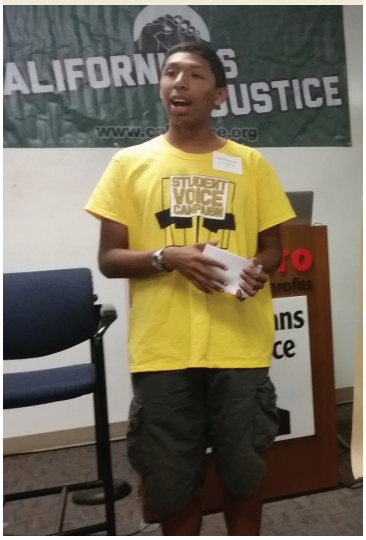
Goals of this Paper

This is not the first paper written to focus on the importance of young people becoming politically active. In order to ensure that this paper

actually becomes additive to the field, and is not solely window-dressing for the participating organizations and scholars, this paper was written in an attempt to achieve the following goals:

- **Create a more comprehensive overview of the field of democracy education, which ranges from in-school civic learning to out-of-school youth organizing.** Many democracy education efforts to date have focused on the in-school aspect of civic learning, but there is growing evidence and scholarship on the value and impact of informal learning environments and out-of-school leadership opportunities that help youth develop civic skills through concrete action opportunities.
- **More explicitly focus on the link between democracy education and the most pressing political issues of the day.** While previous efforts have argued that the traditional purpose of schools is to educate our young people to become engaged citizens, and that this mission has been lost, our current political climate also poses special challenges and opportunities. These include deepening racial inequalities, the rise of mass incarceration, over-policing, unjust disciplinary policies in schools, the re-segregation of public education, and inequality of opportunity by race and gender in education and the labor market.
- **Examine the importance of young people becoming politically and civically active.** While community service and service learning are important, this paper argues that young people must learn how to use the political system, and existing governmental institutions, to effect the change they wish to see in their communities. We refer to this as political engagement, not solely civic engagement, or service learning. It is the difference between volunteering at a soup kitchen and promoting policy solutions that address hunger in low-income communities, such as ending food deserts or promoting increased Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits.
- **Firmly establish democracy education as a discipline that young people in this country must receive** as part of their individual development, and for the broader long-term success of this country. Youth participatory political engagement is necessary to cultivate individual agency, civic engagement, and long-term leadership. Democracy education, in all its forms, can create the foundational opportunities for young people to build the skills and competencies they need to be meaningfully engaged.

Young people must learn how to use the political system.



Young People: Engaged, but Not Politically

On the aggregate, young people do want to make a difference in these increasingly tumultuous times. But they do not see institutional politics, and interacting with government, as the way to create this change. This sentiment

is especially prevalent amongst low-income populations, who overwhelmingly feel that government does not represent them or their interests.[2]

Despite the influx of issues currently facing our country, young people are increasingly divorcing themselves from the political process. Young people are not engaging in the democratic process, and at the same time, we are not teaching them the knowledge and skills required for political participation, or convincing them of its merits. This is occurring despite concrete evidence of youth idealism and energy in other social, non-political arenas, and intensive growth in social movement activity amongst young people.[3]

Across the board, evidence shows that our youngest generations, the Millennials (Generation Y), and their successors, (which some have coined Generation Z), want to make a positive impact. A recent study by the Brookings Institute found that 64% of Millennials assert that it is a priority for them to make the world a better place. Young people see the increasingly unequal education system, experience the difficulty in getting a fair-wage job, and witness the racial tensions throughout society, and they want to work towards a better and fairer country.[4]

But despite this idealism, young people do not see the political system as the best way to enact change. Institutions are seen as the problem, and not the solution. A recent poll found that over half of Millennials regularly volunteer, **and even more think that the best way to make positive changes in society is through volunteering and charities—not by being active in or through engagement with government.** Only 20% trust the federal government to do what is right most of the time. In contrast, a 1973 Pew study found that the majority of young people trusted government to do the right thing.[5]

These attitudes influence behavior, leading to a decrease in youth political involvement over time. In the 1972 presidential election, 52% of 18-24 year olds voted versus 36% in 2000. Despite an uptick during the Obama's first election, in 2012 rates dropped again to 38%. CIRCLE found that only 20% of 18-29 year olds voted in the 2014 midterm election, **the lowest youth turnout vote ever recorded by the US Census.** These numbers reflect a persistent negative trend in youth voting.[6]

The current political climate, marked by polarization and dysfunction, seems to be demotivating political participation amongst young people. This leads to a vicious cycle where young people are not participating in

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NOW ONLY 20% OF MILLENIALS TRUST THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT TO DO WHAT IS RIGHT MOST OF THE TIME.



[2] "Harvard Poll Finds Millennials Have Little Faith in Government, Media." USA TODAY College. 29 Apr. 2015.

[3] Lawless, Jennifer L., and Richard Logan Fox. Running from Office: Why Young Americans Are Turned off to Politics.

[4] "How Millennials Could Upend Wall Street and Corporate America." The Brookings Institution. 28 May 2014.

[5] "Survey of Young Americans' Attitudes Toward Politics and Public Service." Harvard Institute of Politics, 29 Apr. 2015.

[6] "2014 Youth Turnout and Youth Registration Rates Lowest Ever Recorded; Changes Essential in 2016." CIRCLE. 1 July 2015.

"Political institutions are detached from how people live on a day to day basis."

President Obama



politics and elected officials do not pay attention to issues that affect young people. This results in policy outcomes that disproportionately harm young people and other unrepresented groups. It is also important to note that young people are a demographic without official economic, political, or social power- they require effective proxies (e.g., government and its institutions, their families, community organizations, and/or other adult actors) to make effective decisions on their behalf. Thus, ensuring the voices of young people are magnified is even more important because of their lack of direct power.

There are pockets of organizations doing effective work to engage young people in politics, and sporadic examples of youth effectively engaging politically, including through social movements. The recent #BlackLivesMatter activism and the Movement for Black Lives, in response to the wave of police brutality cases, is an illustration of promising youth activism, as are the DREAMers, undocumented students who have positively influenced the Obama Administration on issues of immigrant rights. The challenge is that these social movements are exceptions, rather than the rule, and often, dilute over time because of a lack of broader engagement of people. While social movements may be necessary to solve many of the aforementioned societal challenges, currently, they only involve a small proportion of young people.

Additionally, an increase in movement activity has not corresponded to an increase in voter participation. Long-term change will not happen unless explicit engagement with political institutions follows movements, and until there are explicit efforts to address the ways in which political institutions exclude and marginalize certain groups of people. There is not an adequate mechanism towards ensuring that all young people are engaging in politics, understanding how and why to do so, and doing so sustainably.

The challenge with these skeptical, or at worse, cynical, youth political attitudes is that, despite the dysfunction of government, politics still matter. A functioning democracy requires the basic building block of an active populace. Without adequate and complete political representation, we are undermining the founding principles of the country and our democracy.

President Obama recently acknowledged this disparity when he said:

"The problem is that there is this big gap between who we are as a people and how our politics expresses itself. And part of that has to do with gerrymandering and Super PACs and lobbying and a media that is so splintered now that we're not in a common conversation... All those things have combined to make our political institutions detached from how people live on a day-to-day basis.

And that's part of why people get so frustrated, and so cynical. But ironically, you get a negative feedback loop. People start thinking, what's happening in Washington is so distant from how I see things,

that I'm not even going to bother to vote, or to listen. As a consequence, then, the public withdraws, and you get an even worse political gridlock and polarization.

The question is how we build institutions and connections that allow the goodness, decency, commonsense of ordinary folks to express itself in the decisions that are made in how the country moves forward." [7]

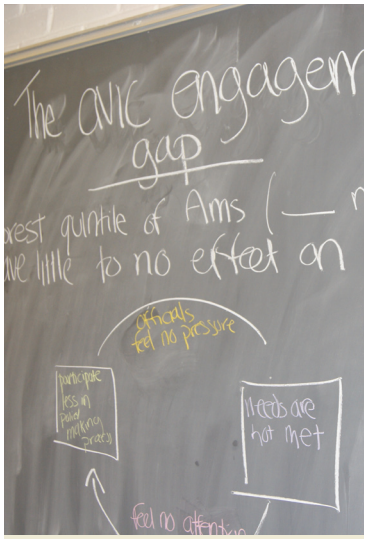
Paradoxically, we face generations of active, idealistic, optimistic, energetic, and socially interested young people in America coming of age - but not enough of them see politics as the way to make meaningful change. The question then becomes how we channel this idealism towards the political change this country needs to solve the pressing issues of the day. We need to build a dialogue on the national and local levels alike aimed at improving youth political engagement.

Enter Democracy Education

Schools are not teaching political engagement

One of the key reasons that young people are not politically engaged is that schools are not teaching them the values or skills to be politically engaged while they are still in school. A recent National Assessment of Educational Progress test demonstrated that only 23% of 8th graders were proficient in civics. The recent focus on STEM education and focus on standardized testing of core subjects, while necessary in some respects, has largely pushed the discipline of civics out of the classroom.[8]

Additionally, young people are receiving unequal civic learning opportunities: students in low-income schools, when compared with just average socio-economic status (SES) schools, are half as likely to study how laws are made, and 30% less likely to report having experiences with debates or panel discussions in social studies classes. It should be noted that this does not equate to low-income young people being less likely to want to make a difference in their communities. But, on the aggregate, this civic opportunity gap leads to a lack of young people learning how to use the system to make change.



According to the 2015 NAEP test, only 23% of 8th graders were proficient in civics.

There is a gap in reform

The simultaneous decay of our political and educational systems has inspired numerous education and political reform efforts. But they are not working in cohesion.

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[7] "Obama Speaks Candidly On Gun Control, Race In Podcast Appearance." NPR. NPR. Web. 22 Jun. 2015.

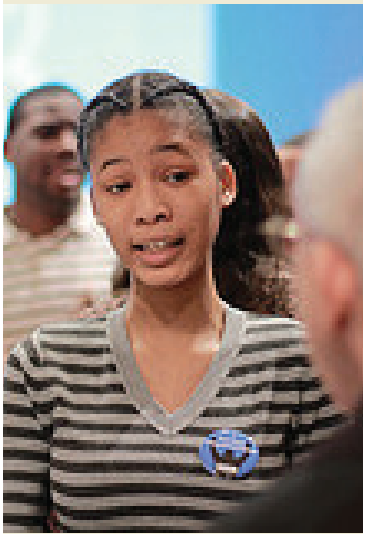
[8] "2014 Civics Assessment, The Nation's Report Card, 2014." The Nation's Report Card. July 2015.

On the political end, policymakers, scholars, and philanthropists tend to focus on institutional reforms, like money in politics, Congress' ineffectiveness, and political polarization. These reforms are necessary but inadequate, failing to account for the role of people and individual participation in improving the system that represents their interests.

On the education side, reform efforts have increasingly focused on accountability, choice, and standards, often times (sometimes purposefully, other times not) eroding the notion of education as a public good. Many education reformers often see politics as important as a means to an end for specific education policy reforms. However, they are less likely to see an engaged democracy as an end in itself.

Recognizing the need to reform both systems, we must mind the gap between education and our democracy and engage young people by teaching them how to effectively participate in our political process. When conducted effectively, democracy education can improve individual academic motivation and performance, reform institutions, and lead to better and more equitable social outcomes. And only with informed and engaged individuals can we create successful future reform efforts.

Experts recommend informally involving young people in governance efforts, whether through commissions or advisory groups.



Defining Democracy Education

Democracy education refers to the field of teaching young people, specifically in the K-12 setting and age range, to be informed and active members of civic and political life. This education takes place in different settings, both in school and out of school, through a variety of experiences, and utilizing diverse curricula. Common elements in all approaches focus on educating students on:

- How federal and local government works, including knowledge on basic structures, processes, and decision-makers;
- Roles, responsibilities, and opportunities for engagement, as individuals in our democracy;
- Basic power structures in their communities; and
- How individuals can make a difference on issues they care about.

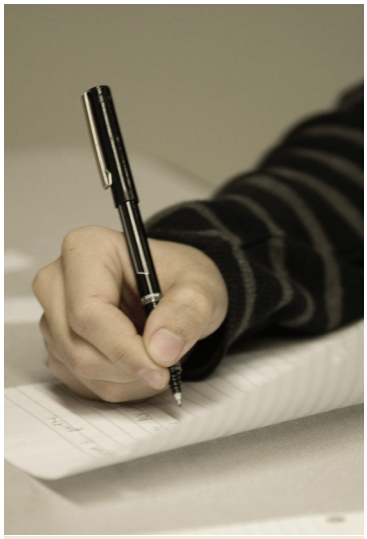
There are currently four primary approaches of democracy education:

1. Civics Education (In and Out-of-school): This approach draws heavily from the discipline of history and the social sciences and emphasizes students' mastery and application of academic ideas and skills related to civics. This also includes extracurricular spaces, afterschool programs, and clubs, in which young people may engage in political practice in the context of positive youth leadership and development.

2. Action Civics (In and Out-of-school): Students learn about the political process through a student-centered process in which young people take local action on specific issues in their communities. This discipline can happen in school or out of school.

3. Youth Organizing (Out-of-school): A youth development strategy that focuses on training young people in community organizing and advocacy. Youth utilize acquired skills to analyze power structures, and ultimately attempt to create meaningful institutional change in their communities. Typically, youth organizing occurs in the out-of school space, offering a more intensive experience than civics education or action civics, but often with a smaller number of students participating.

4. Youth Participation in Governance (Out-of-school): There are various efforts to formally or informally involve young people in governance efforts, whether through commissions or advisory groups. This includes effort like the formally recognized San Francisco Youth Commission, and is sometimes referred to as "youth participatory politics."



Democracy education is occurring effectively in pockets throughout the country.

Previous Democracy Education Efforts

Currently democracy education is occurring effectively in pockets throughout the country in diverse forms. There are no national efforts in scale, and the disparate approaches are neither currently formally connected nor thought of as a field.

The field of democracy education has seen important developments in recent years that make the case for its importance. Specific examples include:

- In 2003, 60 organizations, representing a wide range of fields, disciplines, approaches to civics, and ideologies came together to write The Civic Mission of Schools. That report was the basis of an effective advocacy campaign now co-chaired by Justice Sandra Day O'Connor and Senator Bob Graham, as well as loosely affiliated state "Civic Mission" campaigns in Illinois, California, and elsewhere. Among the many results of this effort is the O'Connor Civic Education Act in Florida and recent civics education legislation in Illinois. In 2012, the Campaign published the "Guardian of Democracy", which updates the case for civic education both in schools and in other settings.[9]
- CIRCLE (The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning & Engagement) has produced a stream of research on the importance of civic learning, much of it focused on inequality. A 2013 Commission of Youth Voting and Civic Knowledge, organized by CIRCLE, produced a consensus document, All Together Now: Collaboration and Innovation for Youth Engagement: on policies to improve the informed voting of young adults.[10]

[9] "Guardian of Democracy." The Civic Mission of Schools, 15 Sept. 2011.

[10] "Commission on Youth Voting and Civic Knowledge." CIRCLE. 9 Oct. 2013.

- The National Council of Social Studies (NCSS) has produced "College, Career, and Citizenship (C3)" framework for the social studies, which includes a fourth critical dimension of civics – taking informed action. At least nine states are implementing this framework to date.[11]
- In 2012, the National Action Civics Collaborative (NACC) was formed, in which over 30 organizations have advocated for the importance of civic action.
- In 2012, at the request of the White House, a coalition called The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement published A Crucible Moment: College Learning & Democracy's Future.[12]

These efforts demonstrate the intellectual, ideological, and geographical diversity that building a field requires. Additionally, the existing evidence demonstrates that, on the aggregate, we understand the importance of the work. However, despite this body of research, democracy education has devolved into a "nice-to-have" subject, rather than a "need-to-have."

Democracy education still unfortunately lags as a fringe discipline, behind subjects like mathematics and science.



With all of this research and work, it is fair to ask how this paper is additive to the field. But these documents do leave certain gaps. Young people grow up in communities that include a wide range of educative institutions, including youth networks and community-based organizations, as well as schools and colleges. Most previous efforts have focused on in-school civics education efforts.

Additionally, waves of recent political organizing by youth have not been deeply reflected in these previous efforts. The current #BlackLivesMatter movement is an important example; it is explicitly political and movement-oriented, it originates with youth and is led by young people, and it raises the national profile of a set of issues that are closely related to youth civic development and inequality. Most importantly, it elevates youth power and voice on issues that not only affect young lives but also our broader democracy, such as criminalization, racial equity, and mass incarceration.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, while previous efforts have been valuable, democracy education still unfortunately lags as a fringe discipline. This paper attempts to give energy to the effort by making new arguments and bringing in diverse players, while also attempting to provoke debate on critical issues, both amongst organizations and individuals currently in the field, and amongst external actors still on the periphery.

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[11] "The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards: Guidance for Enhancing the Rigor of K-12 Civics, Economics, Geography, and History."National Council for the Social Studies. 2013.

[12] Crucible Moment: College Learning & Democracy's Future: A Call to Action and Report from The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012.

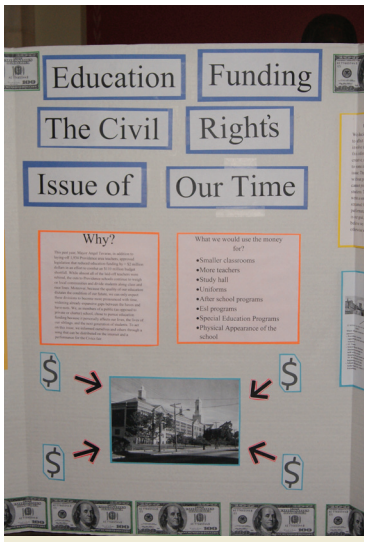
The Effects of Democracy Education

As we acknowledge that democracy education still lags as a fringe discipline, it becomes evident that, despite previous efforts, the rationale for democracy education has not been effectively established or communicated to the broader public. In order to effectively promote democracy education as a field and as a force for change that should be recognized and its mandate funded, the burgeoning field needs to firmly establish its importance and potential impact. As such, there are three core reasons democracy education matters:

1. Democracy Education Transforms Individuals

Research demonstrates that effective democracy education leads to personal transformation and improved individual political and academic outcomes. Young people recognize that their individual voices matter, feel efficacious, and improve their overall engagement, which leads to an overall range of positive youth outcomes, including academic gains. This holds true with all forms of democracy education, and demonstrates a correlation between this type of learning and recognized youth development practices and outcomes. Various studies have shown the impact of effective democracy education on individual success:

- A 2007 working paper commissioned by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) found empirical evidence that civic engagement improves educational attainment. Involvement in distinct types of civic engagement opportunities led to statistically significant increases in test scores in other disciplines, including reading, math and science. The paper found that civic activities undertaken during high school are related to significantly higher odds that individuals graduate from college in later years.[13] It should be noted that this paper did focus on service learning, but its studies should be applicable to more politically-based democracy education efforts.
- A California-specific study conducted in 2013 by UCLA professor John Rogers and USC professor Veronica Terriquez found that youth organizing alumni are far more likely than comparable peers to enroll in four-year colleges and universities, and more likely to be civically engaged in the long-term.[14]
- A study conducted by the external firm GlassFrog Solutions on Generation Citizen's in-school action civics program found that student efficacy positively changed as a result of the democracy education programming.



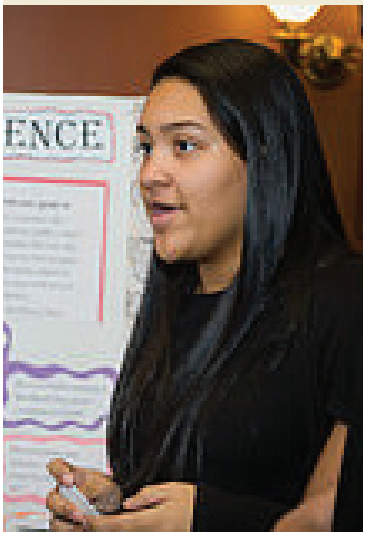
According to a CIRCLE study civic activities undertaken during high school are related to significantly higher odds that individuals graduate from college.

[13] Davila, Alberto, and Marie Mora. "Civic Engagement and High School Academic Progress." CIRCLE, 2007.

[14] Rogers, John and Veronica Terriquez. "Learning to Lead: The Impact of Youth Organizing on the Educational and Civic Trajectories of Low-Income Youth." The Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access, 2013.

Students felt that they were starting to acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to make their voices heard, and saw shifts in their own mindsets about their ability to make decision-makers pay attention to their concerns.[15]

Evidence exists to demonstrate that effective democracy education can transform and improve the institutions through which young people frequently engage.



Research demonstrates that these types of democracy education experiences provide specific engaging and culturally relevant contexts for youth to acquire academic skills in supportive environments. In an education system in which young people often feel that their coursework is not relevant to their lives, democracy education offers specific opportunities to engage in problems that matter to young people every day in their own lives. This is especially important for youth of color, who often find little representation of themselves in textbooks that discuss history or teach the basics of civics, and in fact experience educational and other systems in ways that exclude them from equal opportunity or quality. This lack of representation in textbooks and much of broader societal culture can instead be mitigated through relevant democracy education.

Finally, many of the skills associated with effective democracy education include competencies such as oral and written persuasive communication, group-work, and critical thinking. These are skills that are not just important to being an engaged member of society, but are also critical to success in school and the workplace.

2. Democracy Education Improves Institutions – Including and Especially Schools – and Civic Infrastructure

Evidence exists to demonstrate that effective democracy education can transform and improve the institutions with which young people frequently engage, and specifically, lead to the more frequent and effective integration of youth voice into relevant establishments including schools and in cities. This, in turn, can improve the lives of people living in these communities. Two examples demonstrate the opportunity democracy education offers to improve institutions:

- In response to the wave of zero-tolerance policies at schools throughout the country, a number of schools are experimenting with the concept of restorative justice, in which young people develop meaningful consequences for their own actions while simultaneously developing empathy for each other through facilitated "talking circles." In many cases, disciplinary policies are actually led by student juries, who decide the ultimate sentence for their peers. Instead of a top-down administrative led approach, restorative justice offers the potential for youth to take ownership through meaningful reflection. While the system may conjure images of a chaotic, Lord of the Flies'eque student-led system, initial results from specific schools and districts

[15] Casciano, Rebecca and Jonathan Davis. "Generation Citizen and Student Efficacy." GlassFrog Solutions, July 2013.

demonstrate that overall suspension rates have decreased significantly and school climate and culture have improved with sustained use of restorative justice. Restorative justice offers the opportunity to provide youth leader ship through democracy education, while improving antiquated and ineffective school disciplinary policies.[16]

In the fall of 2011, low-income students of color working with Californians For Justice (CFJ) in Fresno conducted outreach and action research to determine which issues in their high schools were preventing them from graduating and moving on to college and careers. After analyzing the data, CFJ students and staff found that harsh disciplinary practices and policies proved a significant hindrance factor. Students decided that the most efficient way to combat these policies was to implement evidence-based models of restorative justice aimed at keeping youth in school and on track to graduate.

In 2012, CFJ students and staff teamed up with other youth organizing groups in Fresno to campaign for restorative justice. CFJ recruited students, curated and uplifted stories relating to the negative outcomes of zero-tolerance policies, and solicited positive examples of the ways in which restorative justice can transform a campus. Students met with Fresno School Board members, teachers, administration and other low-income students of color to share their stories and build momentum. In May 2013, the Fresno Unified School Board unanimously voted to implement a restorative justice model in Fresno schools.

- Select cities have worked to provide young people with real responsibilities in ways that allow for authentic input on real decisions. The San Francisco Youth Commission, a ballot-approved-member body, exists to officially advise the mayor and Board of Supervisors on a wide variety of public issues related to young people. In its twenty-year history, the Commission's work and recommendations have led to several concrete successes, including helping to expand San Francisco's universal health care system for children to include 18-24 year olds, issuing reports on sexual assault in San Francisco schools, advising on youth homelessness, and recently, successfully advocating for a ballot referendum on lowering the voting age in local elections. The youth-centric nature of the commission is seen as vital to its success, and the Mayor and Board of Supervisors frequently consult with the Board to get authentic input.[17]

Democracy education does more than improve individual student outcomes or communities—it provides the potential to improve actual public institutions and civic infrastructure. Seeing young people as having relevant civic knowledge provides the opportunity to create more equitable, representative institutions, be it schools, cities, or other institutions.



Democracy education can help create the necessary foundation for a more representative democracy.

[16] Burke, Kimberly. "An Inventory and Examination of Restorative Justice Practices for Youth in Illinois." Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority, 2013.

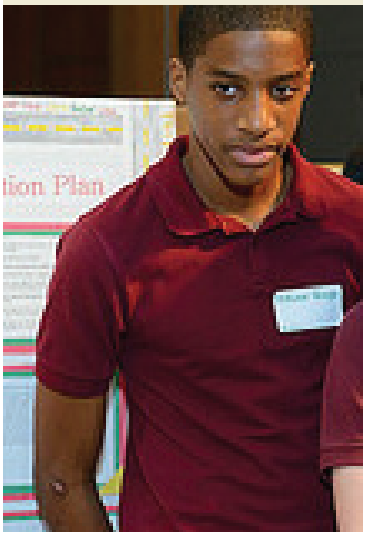
[17] Lauterborn, Peter. "San Francisco Youth Commission Report on Sexual Assault and Harassment in San Francisco Schools." San Francisco Youth Commission, April 2005,

3. Democracy Education Improves Society

Perhaps most importantly, effective democracy education has the potential to lead to real societal transformation. By teaching young people their rights and responsibilities as civic actors and leaders, democracy education can help create the necessary foundation for a more representative democracy, and ultimately, disrupt existing inequitable power structures. There is less concrete evidence for this type of societal change—it is incumbent on the field to invest in the long-term research that will allow for this type of link.

A lack of people-centered political participation is a core driver in today's democratic dysfunction. While effective democracy education that concretely shows students the potential impact and importance of active political participation is not the only solution, it can serve as a key mechanism for larger societal change, and one that can address some of the current systemic issues in our democracy.

We believe inequality must be solved by those directly impacted by the problem.



Perhaps no issue is more important and pressing in our country today than inequality—both economic and political. Currently, our education system encourages and perpetuates this inequality, given the disparate access and quality of programs, services, and supports that we offer to different demographics of students, coupled with the reality that low-income and students of color do not receive effective democracy education experiences. Professor Meira Levinson has coined this reality as the "civic opportunity gap."

The Opportunity Presented by Unequal Civic Opportunities

This inequity offers an opportunity. Focusing on providing low-income populations with an authentic democracy education experience, whether it be in-classroom civics or youth organizing, can show young people how they can take ownership of problems in their own communities, and ultimately, shift power structures. And ultimately, their leadership is vital, as issues like inequality must be solved by those directly impacted by the problem.

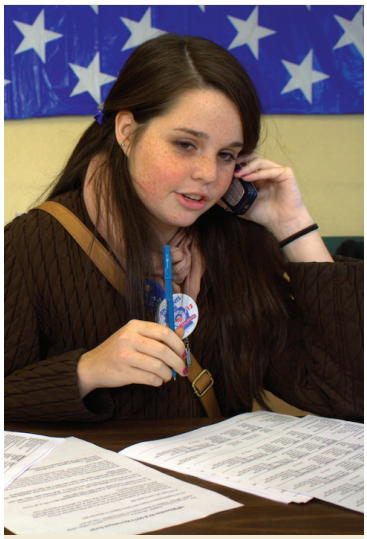
Recent events in places like Ferguson, Missouri, represent both the challenge and the opportunity. After the events following Michael Brown's death, it became apparent that the majority of governmental representatives in Ferguson were white, despite the fact that the town's population was majority black. Ferguson's citizens did not see themselves in their representatives, and thus, did not participate in the process. The system was proving itself as unjust and a vicious cycle had ensued.

A concrete way to interrupt this cycle is through democracy education, and through changing the very foundations from which the cycle emerges—the behavior, motivations, and knowledge of young people. By teaching, training, and empowering young people, especially low-income and people of color, to recognize their ability to change the political system, unequal power structures

can change. This will take time—more time than engaging in voter registration drives or focusing on institution centric reform, but the way we ultimately help create Ferguson political bodies that are more representative of their citizens is to teach young people to participate. Democracy education itself will not solve the problem, but it can help create the conditions necessary for a more equitable society by teaching young people how to be political leaders.

This same power-shifting strategy holds true with economic inequality. Politicians currently face inadequate repercussions for political inaction in the face of economic inequality because low-income individuals do not wield adequate political power.

In the short-term, there are policies that can be put into place to help equalize the economic playing field. Over the long-term, however, the best way to create a more equitable society is to shift power dynamics. This starts with ensuring all young people, regardless of income, are educated on their role as civic actors and leaders. When they then participate in the process, through the ballot box, organizing, or other political means, elected officials will be forced to address issues plaguing their communities, from police brutality to unaffordable public transit to persistent unemployment.



Teaching young people to be politically active will lead to a transformed society.

Indeed, citizens at the highest level of socio-economic status are approximately five times more politically active than those at the bottom. An American Political Science Association study demonstrated that the bottom quintile of income earners have little to no effect on their political representatives.[18] Politicians pay attention to those who participate, and those people usually have extensive financial resources. Thus, this political inequality influences much of the larger economic inequality that we see throughout the country—low income interests are not represented at the table.

Transforming Political Power Dynamics through Democracy Education is a Long-Term Solution

There is currently only minimal research that demonstrates teaching young people to be politically active will lead to a transformed society with more equitable political and economic structures. Because of this, we tend to focus on immediate democracy renewal efforts—concentrating on registering voters and electing better public officials. These are necessary. But they are insufficient.

In the long-term, a more engaged electorate, especially in low-income and minority populations, is necessary in order to change the existing political power realities in this country. There might not be a more powerful sentiment than the notion that every person, regardless of race, class, or background, has the same say over the direction of his/her country. We need to ensure that young people are leading the charge to preserve this quintessentially American dynamic.

[18] Scholzman, Kay. "Inequalities of Political Voice." American Political Science.Association, 2004.

Effective democracy education can help curb economic inequality.



What's Next? Creating A Field

Now is the time to build a holistic field to encourage and educate young people to become political actors. While the vast majority of American young people are not receiving an effective democracy education, there are pockets of success throughout the country. We can see that democracy education, whether done in school or out-of-school, has potential for individual, institutional and ultimately, societal transformation. We know that young people eager to change the world, but they don't see the value of doing it through the political process, nor are they being taught how to do so. And we know that a functioning democracy requires representation and activity from its people.

While an unconventional comparison, the democracy education field should look to STEM (referring to the fields of science, technology, engineering, and math) as an example of an educational field that successfully promoted a discipline as a solution to individual and societal challenges. In this case, STEM advocates used compelling data to demonstrate that Americans were not adequately receiving education in the disciplines increasingly needed in the work force. The advancement of STEM has occurred because of the persuasive argument that the discipline is needed for Americans (to get better jobs) and for America (to compete on the global stage). Democracy education needs to articulate a similarly compelling narrative in order to move from being an add-on educational program, to a discipline recognized as a vital learning component for every young person in this country.

There are those who may think that this is not a perfect analogy, as STEM's resurgence was largely due to its promotion of an explicit pro-growth agenda. But in a similar fashion, promoting effective democracy education can, as argued, help curb inequality, which many have deducted would help improve the country's overall economic environment. The lessons from STEM, thus, should be instructive. Rather than attempting to see the field as subversive in some way, proponents should attempt to articulate how it will benefit society at large. This is the only way democracy education can meaningfully scale.

There are pockets of effective democracy education happening, but determining a way to make the discipline more than a good program for certain students is vital. Scaling democracy education is not about creating one national program. Effective democracy education takes into account local political contexts, and different forms can be effective in diverse environments. Therefore, we argue that promoting the discipline requires first reminding stakeholders of:

1. Why young peoples' participation is critical to continuing a functional and authentic democracy;
2. What a clear framework for the ecosystem of democracy education looks like; and,
3. A clear synthesis of its current and potential impact.

It should be noted that while this paper frames democracy education as a field, the different streams of activity (specifically, civics education, action civics, youth organizing, and youth participation in government) are not c urrently recognized as part of a common agenda. Even while writing this paper, the tensions became apparent. At times, youth organizers would argue that civics education efforts are not deep enough to lead to meaningful change. At the same time, promoters of civics education claimed that youth organizing efforts do not affect enough young people, or are too partisan in nature. **This paper strongly argues that each of the four approaches – and perhaps others – needs to work together to create a cohesive field.**

Therefore, one of the key tasks at hand is to promote more exchange amongst practitioners, and between diverse practitioners and scholars, funders, and policymakers. Indeed, while some research has been conducted showing the promise of the field, there is much more conceptual work that remains. This includes:

1. Identifying inquiry, deliberation, and social action experiences that are critical for robust democratic engagement;
2. Identifying the understanding and skills that students should develop in the context of democracy education programs;
3. Further defining the type of active engagement we hope to cultivate in our young people through democracy education.

To actually build a substantive field for democracy education, the following needs to occur:



Much theoretical work has been accomplished, but more program evaluation needs to be conducted.

Practitioners should:

- Collaborate meaningfully, both to build the field, and to create actual pipe lines for youth activism. In-school civics education providers need to work with youth organizing entities, which would allow the discipline to reach more students, while also providing possibilities for students to go deeper in their policy work.
- Share best practices in terms of effective school and organizing curriculums, teacher trainings, and evaluation.
- Move beyond the competitive nature prevalent in the non-profit arena and work to promote the discipline widely.
- Document and tell the stories of the power and impact of their work through the voices of the young people themselves.

Scholars should:

- Further demonstrate the individual and societal transformation that democracy education causes. Much theoretical work has been accomplished, but more program evaluation needs to be conducted, especially proving the impact of democracy education on institutions and society.

- Determine how to demonstrate an effect of youth political involvement on specific political challenges of the day, such as inequality and polarization.
- Conduct rigorous randomized control trials to test the impact of democracy education programs on indicators, such as academic engagement and skills development.
- Work in partnership with practitioners to build descriptive and normative, field-informed frameworks that help articulate the various approaches and map how they complement each other in a broader democracy education ecosystem.

Funders should:

- Move past the "democracy" and "education" silos and take a chance on the potential of the discipline.
- Create a "fund of the fund" and invest significant resources into democracy education programs, research, and field building over the next decade. Specifically, foundations should come together to create a "Democracy Education" fund of at least $25 million to fund promising practices and conduct further research in the field.
- Work with practitioners and scholars to determine the additional proof necessary to make democracy education a funding priority, both for practitioners and for scholars.
- Support networks and field-building activities that stitch together democracy education across stakeholders (practitioners, advocates, youth, funders, scholars, and policymakers) and within stakeholder groups (e.g., those who represent different elements of the four approaches should be in conversation with each other to complement each other and build the field).

Policymakers should:

- Emphasize democracy education as a vital aspect of a child's holistic education using the bully pulpit and specific policy. It must be seen as essential to ensure young people have the requisite tools needed so they are prepared to maintain and improve our democracy.
- Study the efficacy of specific local laws, including Florida's civic education test, Tennessee's civic skills assessment, and Illinois civic class mandate.
- Look to create effective ways for young people to provide input into local policy, like the San Francisco Youth Commission.
- Hold a policy-maker specific convening to discuss specific ways to promote democracy education.



My voice matters, it matters a lot.

Miajia Jawara

Young People should:

- Lead, and talk about how powerful democracy education can be.
- Be leaders in changing the narrative about the power and voice of youth, and the centrality of democracy education to their lives and to achieving the aspirations of our democracy.

We can talk about research and write papers and host forums. But the most powerful evidence is seeing young people who have been transformed by the experience of participating in democracy education find their own political voice and use it to change their communities. They are the reason we do this work and the power of their actions the very essence of our democracy. To this end, we conclude this paper with Miajia Jawara's powerful words:

Miajia Jawara, Senior, Philip Randolph High School, NYC

"Being as young as I am, I've been told that I don't really have a place in politics, that my voice is insignificant, that no one would ever listen. Oh the lies they've told me. Truth be told, my voice matters, it matters a lot, and because of Generation Citizen I've had the opportunity to not only voice my opinion, but to have it heard. I won't lie, at first I was timid. After being told for so long that nothing I said mattered, suddenly I was put into this room full of adults who wanted to hear what I had say. They wanted to know my point of view and they gave me all these different scenarios and said "Well. Miaija what would you do? How would you handle it?" They gave me this newfound power, and they could not wait for me to use it.

Last summer I did not spend it out on the beach, or at the pool, or at amusement parks. I'll admit that that would have been nice, but instead I was here, with about 15 other people my age being a part of something so unheard of that it could not be replaced by a million summer vacations spent lounging in the sun. I was at the Urban Youth Collaborative discussing the school-to-prison pipeline, and unjust and biased disciplinary codes in NYC schools. I was out in the streets blocking traffic, and making headlines shouting to the skies in hopes that Mike Brown would get the justice he deserved. I was at the Truthworker Theatre Company watching ordinary kids just like me stand on stages and transform their surroundings into jail cells, and watching them re-enact the brutalities that happen in prison cells to so many of our youth. I was shaking hands with Councilman Ritchie Torres. I was all over New York City learning so much, and being a part of so much, that when the summer finally ended, I was suddenly wishing it was July again, and it was my first day of being a Community Change Fellow.

Last summer was not only an amazing experience that every 16 year old should have. It was also something that has shaped who I am right now. Nine months ago, if you were to ask me anything about disciplinary codes, or how I feel about youth involvement in their community, I could not have given you an answer. But now, I could write you a five page paper on why those issues are so important. I could go on an on and tell you about how empowering it is to know that your ideas are being used to solve an issue as big as the school to prison pipeline. I could tell you all of it, but I'd much rather you experience it for yourself.

Democracy education is something that needs to be in every high school across the country. We need for everyone to understand how important this is. Not only because we are the going to inherit this government, but also because we are the next generation. If you go into any high school, I can

guarantee that you will find a group of kids who envision themselves as the president, or secretary of state, or some other political figure. We know what we want to do, we just don't know where to go.

Not every student is as lucky as I was to be able to have Generation Citizen come to my classroom and make me question what I once thought was normal. Not every student got the opportunity to tour City Hall. Not every student gets to do this, but they should. With as many ideas that we have , and all the solutions that my peers and I proposed this summer, I can't imagine what it'd be like if the entire nation's high schoolers were this enthusiastic about wanting change.

So, the next time someone my age comes to you and says "Hey, I have an idea", don't shoo them away, look them in the eyes and let them know that you want to listen. Encourage what they have to say, and ask them to elaborate. Play devil's advocate and make them see things from different angles, make them question themselves. I ask you this because, if it were not for adults doing the same thing to me, I would not have the courage to be the Community Change Fellow that I am today. I would not be here today.

I thank them for being the ones to make me realize that, young or old, black or white, regardless who you are, or where you come from, your voice matters, you matter, and what you can do to change your community matters."

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