

**CALIFORNIA TASK FORCE**  
**ON K-12 CIVIC LEARNING**

**Revitalizing Civic Learning in California:  
A Call to Action**

**WE ARE FACING A CRISIS IN CIVIC PARTICIPATION**

- Nationally, less than half of eligible young people ages 18-24 voted in the 2012 elections.<sup>1</sup>
- A telephone survey of 1000 Americans of voting age revealed that members of the general public are more likely to be able to name the judges on American Idol than on the United States Supreme Court.<sup>2</sup>
- In California, a survey of 2,366 high school seniors revealed that just 60 percent could answer questions designed to test their knowledge of the structures and functions of government and of current political issues.<sup>3</sup>
- Less than half of California high school seniors participating in the same survey viewed being actively involved in state and local issues as their responsibility.<sup>4</sup>
- California students who had access to high quality civic learning experiences fared better in the survey, but research shows that such opportunities are unequally distributed. Students from lower income families have less access to high quality civic learning opportunities than students from upper income families.<sup>5</sup>
- California's current civics classes emphasize memorization over participatory skills and experiential learning; does not track whether students are prepared for their roles and responsibilities as residents and citizens, and relies on a single American government class in 12<sup>th</sup> grade that comes too late for the many students who have already dropped out.<sup>6</sup>
- Our current history/social science academic standards are 15 years old and out of step with what we know our children need.

**We can and must do better.**

**CIVIC LEARNING HAS MANY BENEFITS**

Civic learning done right helps teach children skills they need for the 21<sup>st</sup> century workplace, including critical thinking, problem solving, communication, collaboration, creativity, initiative and entrepreneurship.<sup>7</sup> It engages students by making what's learned more relevant to real life. It also promotes academic achievement and prevents some students from dropping out. And research shows that young people are more likely to vote if they have taken a civics class.<sup>8</sup>

**JOIN OUR STATEWIDE MOVEMENT**

To chart the course for civic learning in California, Chief Justice Tani Cantil-Sakauye and State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson joined together to establish the California Task Force on K-12 Civic Learning. This group of experts and leaders began working together in July 2013 to assess the civic learning landscape and craft recommendations to ensure that all California students gain the knowledge, skills and values they need.

We invite you to review the task force's draft recommendations in this document and provide feedback at a Task Force Regional Meeting or via our online survey.

To learn more, visit <http://www.myboe.org/go/group/name/CivicLearningTaskforce>,

Follow us on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/CACivicLearning>

For your reference, a box on page 7 shares definitions of key terms.

## **Civic Participation**

California history includes thousands of examples of Californians whose active participation has made this state a better place for everyone who lives here. We have a rich legacy to build on as we pursue our goal to better educate our state’s residents to understand how government works, how to participate in it and how to make intelligent decisions about issues that affect their lives, livelihoods and communities.

Participation can take many forms, and there are numerous ways in which students, their families and communities can make a difference. Voting is one of our most important rights and responsibilities, but civic engagement does not start or end at the ballot box. Civic engagement also includes speaking to the school board, writing to congressional representatives, serving on a jury, understanding and debating current events and helping others.

As noted in a new report from Stanford University, schools play a crucial role in strengthening and encouraging civic learning that exposes students to the knowledge, skills and values they need to fully participate in our society.<sup>9</sup> Acknowledging this responsibility, the California Board of Education states that its mission includes ensuring that all California students have “fulfilling personal lives and careers and contribute to civic and economic progress in our diverse and changing democratic society.”<sup>10</sup>

### **What is High Quality Civic Learning?**

In high quality civic learning, students learn to think critically, develop research skills, assess and synthesize information and present coherent arguments based on data. To put these skills into practice, they work with others, organize activities in their communities and speak persuasively in public. They also develop common shared values about equality and fairness and understand that their actions can have an impact, especially when a group of people works together. The box at the right elaborates on civic learning outcomes.

As a nation, we already know how to do civic learning well. We know that it starts with classroom instruction in government and history and extends to actual engagement and experiences in our communities. According to the research, six core activities—known as the six proven practices—directly improve the quality and effectiveness of civic learning in our schools.<sup>11</sup> The six proven practices are described in the box on the next page.

We also know that the success of what happens inside of schools depends in part on the quality of the school climate—the quality, character and personality of school

#### **CIVIC LEARNING OUTCOMES**

What do we want our children to know and be able to do as a result of participating in high quality civic learning experiences? We want them to have the knowledge, skills and values they need to fully participate in our democracy.

##### **Civic Knowledge**

- Understand history, geography, law and economics
- Understand constitutional concepts such as separation of powers and due process
- Understand democratic processes and how our government works
- Understand the issues of the day

##### **Civic Skills**

- Be able to gather and process information, listen, think critically, speak in public and engage in discussion and debate
- Be able to collaborate, build consensus and take collective action to address community issues
- Be able to vote, perform jury duty and communicate with policy makers

##### **Civic Values**

- Demonstrate concern for the rights and wellbeing of others
- Tolerate a variety of perspectives
- Have a sense of civic duty
- Be predisposed to take action to change things for the better

life. Effective civic learning both requires and promotes an atmosphere of mutual respect along with a sense of community responsibility. The resulting positive school climate promotes students' overall learning and academic achievement, reduces high risk behaviors and increases teacher retention rates.<sup>12</sup>

Some schools and teachers in California are already using the six proven practices, and we applaud these schools. The next step is to implement these practices in all of our schools, for all of our children, so we can build a stronger and more engaged society and ensure that our children gain the knowledge, skills and values they need to succeed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century economy.

### Why Now?

There has never been a better—or a more crucial—time to revitalize civic learning in California. Our state is in the midst of several major public education reforms, including:

- Implementing the new Common Core State Standards in mathematics and English language arts;
- Implementing new science standards;
- Developing a new English Language Arts/English Language Development Curriculum Framework for English language learners, who now make up close to 40 percent of California's kindergarteners;
- Revising the Academic Performance Index (API) to include more than student test scores;
- Implementing the Local Control Funding Formula, which gives school districts increased control over their budgeting decisions; and
- Designing new assessment systems to be in place by 2016.

As we in California implement these sweeping systemic changes, it is critical that we not leave civic learning behind. In fact, civic learning can actually help us implement many of these reforms. For example, we can take advantage of the natural connection between civic learning and the Common Core State Standards in English language arts to help teachers implement the new standards. They both call for careful reading of informational texts, critical thinking, analysis skills, and developing and communicating arguments based on evidence. Both also emphasize the application of knowledge and skills in real-life settings.

### **THE SIX PROVEN PRACTICES**<sup>13</sup>

Research shows that when educators use the following six civic learning practices, students develop the knowledge, skills and values they need to be productive participants in civic life.

- **Classroom instruction in government, history, law and democracy**, striking a balance between teaching important facts and documents—such as the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights—and demonstrating their relevance to today's society
- **Discussion of current events and controversial issues**, including their relevance to young people's lives
- **Service learning experiences that are directly linked to curriculum and instruction** and that give students a chance to apply what they are learning
- **Extracurricular activities** that give students opportunities to get involved in their schools and communities and to work together toward common goals
- **Student participation in school governance** to cultivate a sense of responsibility and give young people a real voice in how their classrooms and schools are run
- **Simulations of democratic processes**, such as voting, mock trials, model United Nations and simulations of legislative deliberation

## PROPOSED RECOMMENDATIONS

For all students in California to have access to a continuum of high quality civic learning experiences starting in kindergarten, we must embed robust civic learning throughout the K-12 experience, both within and beyond school walls. To this end, the Task Force proposes the following system-wide recommendations to improve civic learning in every district, in every school, for every child.

### **Standards, Assessments and Accountability**

In today's high-stakes K-12 education world, school leaders and teachers must by necessity focus on the "need to know," frequently leaving the "nice to know" by the wayside. Therefore, we must put civic learning squarely in the "need to know" category. To achieve this, we must embed civic learning in core K-12 systems and ways of doing business. These include standards, assessments and accountability mechanisms. [See the definitions box on page 7.]

- **Revise the California History/Social Science content standards and accompanying curriculum frameworks to incorporate an emphasis on civic learning starting in kindergarten**, so all students acquire the knowledge, skills and values they need to succeed in college, career and civic life. The standards define learning outcomes for all students and thus drive the development of accompanying frameworks, instructional materials, curriculum resources, professional learning and assessment.

Establish a timeline and process for updating the California History/Social Science standards, and then complete the California History/Social Science framework to define desired outcomes for civic learning knowledge and skills at every grade level K-12. Standards in all other core academic disciplines—English language arts, mathematics and science—have recently been revised, but the History/Social Science standards are more than a decade old and provide scant attention to strengthening civic knowledge and skills at all grade levels.

- **Integrate civic learning into state assessment and accountability systems for students, schools and districts**, and link assessments to the revised standards recommended above. Assessments should measure mastery of civic knowledge and skills, be performance-based and include data from surveys of students' civic attitudes, participatory skills and hand-on learning experiences. Assessments should measure growth in student civic learning over time and provide data to support continuous improvement in schools and districts.

One option to consider is integrating civics learning as defined in revised standards into the new statewide assessments linked to the Common Core State Standards. The cost of assessing civic outcomes would be a small fraction of the millions that will be spent overall on the new accountability system. A lower cost option would be to test civics through a matrix test in which all students take a brief portion of a test and the results are aggregated to produce results for schools and districts. In either case, the data should be incorporated into the state Academic Performance Index (API).

Accountability systems should provide clear information about student progress in mastering civic knowledge and skills and about the availability, accessibility and quality of civic learning experiences. Civic learning assessment and accountability data could be used as the basis for an annual statewide Civic Learning Report Card.

- **Recognize students, teachers, principals, schools and districts that show exemplary outcomes in civic learning.** Digital badges, certificates and competitive awards are some examples of how to do this.

### **Teaching and Curriculum**

Research shows that teachers have more impact on student learning than any other factor controlled by schools.<sup>14</sup> We also know that teachers are more effective when they work in schools with strong leaders. Together—and with support from other administrators and staff—teachers and school leaders shape the school climate, which guides the quality of everything that happens inside school walls. Teachers and school leaders rely on professional learning experiences to teach them what they need to know and be able to do. Curriculum and instructional materials provide teachers with the tools they need to teach our children well. The Task Force recommends that we:

- **Develop professional learning experiences for teachers and administrators to help them implement civic learning in schools.** Integrate civic learning all along the professional learning continuum, starting in teacher and administrator preparation programs and continuing on through induction support during the early years on the job and ongoing professional learning over the course of teachers' and administrators' entire careers. These experiences should prepare adults with necessary content knowledge and with hands-on experience implementing the six proven practices. Professional learning in civics should target the classroom, extracurricular activities and the entire school culture, so each school embodies our democratic values and principles by involving everyone in governance, decision-making and community building.
- **Connect professional learning in civics to Common Core State Standards professional learning.** California is already in the process of revamping professional learning experiences so that teachers and administrators are equipped to teach to the Common Core State Standards. Given the natural connection between civic learning and the new standards for English language arts, it makes sense to embed professional learning in civics in this work.
- **Develop a progressive and articulated sequence of courses for civic learning across all of K-12,** and peg this curriculum to the revised standards recommended above. At each grade level, civic learning should draw on the six proven practices and include work that is action-oriented and project-based.
- **Develop a best-practices clearinghouse to support effective civic learning.** The clearinghouse should include teacher training modules, curriculum and instructional materials for civics in K-12, as well as resources for afterschool, summer learning and non-traditional learning environments. All posted materials should be validated for quality, be aligned to revised standards and prepare students for performance-based assessments that measure civic learning. The clearinghouse should include interactive features so users can easily share information and write reviews of posted materials and a searchable database to allow teachers and schools to search for programs by grade span.
- **Establish a consortium of interested districts to create models for other districts to use and adapt.** Districts in the consortium would collaborate and share ideas, instructional practices and resources to achieve identified civic learning outcomes for students at each grade level.

### **Families, Community Organizations and Businesses**

Civic learning for all students in California cannot flourish without the active participation and leadership of families, community organizations and businesses. When these stakeholders support civic learning at home, in the community and at school, they knit the community together and connect students to the larger world.

Families, community organizations and businesses can support any of the six proven practices that provide the best match for their interests, time, talents and resources. The Task Force believes that the state and its school districts can help create a favorable environment for participation by these other stakeholders and therefore makes the following recommendations:

- **Support sustained engagement with families, community organizations and businesses.** Enlist families, government, community organizations, businesses and labor in actively supporting and participating in students' civic learning experiences, starting in kindergarten, so together we create a seamless experience between civic life in schools and civic life in our communities. Create a mechanism that enables these stakeholders to provide ongoing input on civic learning inside and outside school.
- **Develop and launch a communications campaign to enhance public understanding of and support for civic learning.** Take advantage of all available communications tools, especially social media, and include strategies to reach people who are not currently engaged in civic life.
- **Work with families, community organizations and businesses to identify what they can do, and provide tools that groups can use to take action.** For example, business, government and community-based organizations might create internships and other service learning opportunities and work with teachers to tie these experiences into civics classroom work. They might also jump-start or support civic learning club activities such as mock trials, junior statesmen and debate teams, starting in elementary and middle school. They can promote and encourage participation in the state's Civic Learning Awards or start a related local award that recognizes outstanding middle and elementary schools or shines a light on an exemplary teacher, school leader, family, business, nonprofit organization or community group.

### **Funding**

In order to implement the above recommendations, we must work together to create funding streams from both existing and new sources. To this end, the Task Force recommends that we:

- **Explore opportunities to tap into existing funding streams, such as:**
  - Common Core State Standards Implementation Funds.
  - Local Control Funding Formula and Local Control Accountability Plans.
  - Linked Learning Funds.
- **Generate new funding streams.**
  - Pursue legislation to dedicate a small portion of state revenue to fund the above recommendations.
  - Seek a portion of federal, state and local professional learning funds to be dedicated to professional learning in civics.
  - Seek private and foundation grants to support development of replicable, high quality civic learning programs and to develop and pilot the Civics Learning Report Card.

**We welcome your feedback and ideas.**

## DEFINITIONS

**Standards:** Standards provide clear, consistent guidelines for what students are expected to learn at each grade level in a given subject. Standards define learning outcomes for students, and they drive the development of frameworks, instructional materials, curriculum resources, professional learning and assessment.

**Frameworks:** Curriculum frameworks provide guidance to teachers in their work to help students meet the outcomes identified in the standards. A framework is a teacher's roadmap.

**Common Core State Standards:** The Common Core State Standards are a single set of educational content standards for K-12 in English language arts and mathematics. The nation's governors and education leaders led the development of the standards, and teachers, parents, school administrators and experts from across the country provided input. California is one of 45 states that have voluntarily adopted the standards.

**Assessments:** Assessments tell us if students are learning what they need to know and be able to do, and they provide useful data that help teachers and school leaders continuously improve teaching and learning. Assessments are designed to determine if students are achieving the outcomes identified in the standards.

**Accountability:** Accountability systems make it possible for families and others to know if all children are learning well and at the appropriate rate. Accountability systems also let families and others know if children are getting equal access to high quality learning opportunities.

**Academic Performance Index (API):** The API measures academic performance and improvement for each school in the state on an annual basis. The API is a single number, ranging from a low of 200 to a high of 1000, which reflects a school's performance level, based on the results of statewide assessments. The state has set 800 as the API target for all schools to meet. Schools that fall short of 800 are required to meet annual growth targets until that goal is achieved. API targets vary for each school.

**Professional Learning:** Professional Learning refers to planned, sequenced experiences that teach educators what they need to know and be able to do to teach our children well. The research suggests that high quality professional learning in civics is content-focused, active, ongoing, connected to curriculum and standards, collaborative and embedded in teachers' daily work flow. Professional learning opportunities are designed to help teachers meet the standards.

## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>10</sup>CDE (California State Board of Education). (2013). Vision, Mission, and Goals. Retrieved from <http://www.cde.ca.gov/be/ag/ag/vmgoals.asp>
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- For more information, visit: <http://www.myboe.org/go/group/name/CivicLearningTaskforce>*