

ENSURING CIVIC READINESS IN A 21ST CENTURY DEMOCRACY

The Promise of Civic Diploma Seals

A White Paper from Generation Citizen

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INTRODUCTION

America has a civic participation problem. Though this has been a tough and pernicious issue in the United States for several decades, recent data from the National Assessment of Education Progress shows that only 23 percent of eighth graders nationwide are proficient in civics.¹ While civic disengagement is prevalent nationwide, it is especially pronounced in communities of color and low-income communities where effective civics education has historically been deemphasized. This is a structural problem and demonstrates, in part, the inequity in access to comprehensive civics education.

Students in these historically marginalized communities, as well as rural communities, are not equally exposed to or explicitly taught the necessary skills for effective civic participation, as compared with students in more affluent communities. Students in these communities are half as likely to study how laws are made, and 30 percent less likely to report having experiences with deliberative discussions in their classes.²

The differentials in access to comprehensive civics education have a direct impact on students' academic outcomes. Students who receive both traditional and interactive civics score highest on assessments and demonstrate high levels of twenty-first century skills such as critical thinking, news comprehension, and work ethic.³

Unequal access to comprehensive civics education, in turn, creates a vicious cycle that burdens entire communities when they seek to better their circumstances and, moreover, limits the diversity of views that policymakers hear in public dialogue.

The status of civic participation and civic education in New York is even more bleak. New York ranked 41 out of 50 states in voter turnout during the 2016 election: just 57 percent of eligible voters cast ballots.⁴ Turnout for local elections is particularly concerning as less than a quarter of registered voters voted in the 2017 New York City citywide election. According to the Corporation for National and Community Service, the NYC/NJ/Long Island metropolitan statistical area (MSA) ranked 49 out of 51 for civic participation.⁵ Only 5.62 percent of residents attended a public meeting of any kind, and only 17.4 percent of residents volunteered in 2015.⁶

While there are many reasons for the lack of civic participation, one root cause of the problem is that civic education is not prioritized in our schools and when it is offered, it is largely through a passive form of education that relies upon rote memorization of random government facts. In New York, students are mandated to complete the one semester Participation in Government and Civics (PIG) course.⁷

PIG is seen as a static form of learning often offered during senior year with emphasis on absorption of facts. Though PIG "aims to provide students with opportunities to become engaged in the political process by acquiring the knowledge and practicing the skills necessary for active citizenship,"⁸ the learning standards do not provide ways to go beyond a passive form of receiving information towards civic skill and agency development. Without project-based civics education, students are learning about the political process without seeing themselves as active participants in that system.

Compounding the challenges named above, COVID-19 has exposed and exacerbated pre-existing inequities in all communities, particularly historically marginalized communities. These inequities stem in part from uneven access to effective civics education, police brutality, inconsistent access to healthcare, and structural barriers to democratic participation.

New York has an opportunity to address these inequities and ensure that students attain civic readiness prior to graduating from New York schools by adopting and implementing the Seal of Civic Readiness in an equitable manner.

Strengthening our Democracy through Active Partnership with Young People

Generation Citizen ("GC") is a decade-old national nonprofit transforming how civics education is taught by bringing the subject to life. GC champions real-world democracy to ensure that every student receives an effective, culturally relevant Action Civics education, which provides them with the knowledge and skills necessary to actively participate in our democracy.

GC envisions a country of young people working to collectively strengthen our American democracy. GC was established as a nonprofit organization in 2010, and has grown rapidly to establish six national locations — Massachusetts, New York, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, the San Francisco Bay Area, and Central Texas — as well as remotely educate students in Alabama, Southern California, and Utah.

Action Civics is a civics education pedagogy with a student-centered, experiential approach to developing the individual skills, knowledge, and dispositions necessary for twenty-first century democratic practice.⁹

Action Civics differs from normative, knowledge-based civic education in the same way that taking any “hands-on,” project-based, or experiential course differs from reading a textbook.¹⁰ Students learn about democratic structures and processes by directly engaging with them, as well as with each other, to address one or more issues they care about impacting their communities.¹¹

GC’s Action Civics curriculum is appropriate for youth in grades 6 through 12 and is implemented during their regular academic classes, including those receiving special education services or English-language learning support. GC is the largest Action Civics education organization in New York that also has a national model.

GC partners with teachers and schools to help them implement GC’s standards-aligned Action Civics education program over the course of a semester during in-school class time, often added to history, social studies, the state-mandated PIG class, as well as increasingly through an interdisciplinary approach in ELA and science strands.

GC provides advocacy planning and support for educators, and supplemental resources for students, teachers, and schools.

Over the course of a semester, students debate issues directly affecting their communities and work as a class to build consensus on one focus issue to address during the semester.

Students then investigate systemic root-causes of their issue and identify a policy-aligned goal to address their issue. Next, they develop strategic action plans to achieve their goal and, finally, implement their plan by engaging directly with influencers and decision-makers. GC prioritizes its efforts to educating students in historically marginalized communities where the availability of effective civics education has been deprioritized.

Setting the Civic Stage in New York: The New York ESSA Plan and Defining Civic Readiness

The New York State Education Department (the Education Department) took a bold step in seeking to address unequal access to civic education plaguing New York’s schools when it included the College, Career and Civic Readiness Index in its federally approved Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) plan.¹² The Education Department appointed the Civic Readiness Task Force (Task Force) to “empower students to become active, engaged civic participants in our multicultural democracy.”¹³

The Education Department delineated the following goals for the Task Force in furtherance of the mandate including the ESSA plan:

- Ensure students develop the knowledge and skills to meaningfully transition to postsecondary opportunities and to exercise civic responsibility;
- Define Civic Readiness;
- Create the Criteria for the Seal of Civic Readiness;
- Explore capstone projects; and
- Create guidance and resources that support the following K-12 NYS Social Studies Framework Practices:
 - Civic Participation
 - Gathering, interpreting, and using evidence

The Education Department appointed 35 individuals reflecting diverse experiences and perspectives to the Task Force, including GC’s New York Executive Director.

The Task Force met five times from 2018-2019 to address its mandate to define civic readiness and to consider requiring a civic capstone project and establishing a proposed seal of civic readiness. The Task Force presented its recommendations to the Education Department and the Board of Regents at the Regents at its January 2020 meeting.¹⁴

The Education Department sought public comment on the proposed changes before finalizing the proposal and moving towards implementation.

GC endorses the Education Department’s proposed definition of civic readiness as an expansive representation of the key indicators of long-term civic participation. The Education Department’s definition goes beyond a focus on civic knowledge, skills and dispositions¹⁵ to also include civic actions and civic mindsets.¹⁶

The other key component of the Education Department’s recommendation is to establish a Seal of Civic Readiness as a diploma pathway to “incentivize[s] districts and students to participate in meaningful civic engagement projects.”¹⁷ While GC supports the recommendation to establish a Seal of Civic Readiness as a diploma pathway, for the reasons articulated below, GC recommends that the Education Department establish a mandate that students complete a capstone requirement as a standalone graduation requirement.

GC further recommends that the Education Department consider the recommendations proposed below to ensure that all districts statewide can support their students in implementing the seal without further exacerbating the inequities in civics education plaguing districts statewide.

Overview of Civic Diploma Seals

Diploma seals are used to recognize students who go beyond the state's minimum graduation requirements. This recognition can highlight important areas of learning and encourage students to participate in learning pathways that push beyond what is required.

Embedding diploma seals for civic learning and participation is one way to address the related problems of unequal access to, and deprioritization of, civics education within the core learning system of K-12. In response to the decline of civic engagement, a 2014 report by the California Task Force on K-12 Civic Learning included "recognition and rewards for progress" in their policy recommendations as a way to recognize civically engaged students will incentivize students to choose civic learning pathways.¹⁸

States are increasingly using diploma seals to accomplish this aim.¹⁹ As an example of this, Arizona, Georgia and Virginia have fully implemented diploma seals for civic learning and participation. The requirements to achieve the seal differ among the three states, with Georgia's guidelines as the most robust in ensuring an effective civics education.

Arizona was the first state to introduce a bill to establish a civic diploma seal through House Bill 2561,²⁰ entitled the Arizona Seal of Civic Literacy, in 2018. The Arizona seal establishes eligibility requirements for students, which include completing all social studies requirements for graduation with GPA of 3.0 or higher; passing the Arizona Civics Exam; and completing portfolio requirements from each of the four categories: Civic Learning Programs, Civic Engagement Activities, Service Learning and/or Community Service, and Written Reflection.²¹

Virginia created the Board of Education's Excellence in Civics Education Seal in 2019. Virginia requires any student that achieved a "B" in the required series of history and government classes and completed 50 hours of community service or extracurricular activities.²²

Georgia was the third state to launch a civic seal. Georgia's Civic Engagement Diploma Seal, like Virginia's, requires 50 hours of community service or extracurricular activities.²³ But Georgia goes further mandating that at least 15 of those hours must be dedicated to "civic engagement activities."²⁴ Similar to Arizona's seal, Georgia requires the student to complete an American Government Skills test.²⁵

The distinguishing factor of Georgia’s seal is its requirement that students complete a capstone project.²⁶ Similar to Action Civics pedagogy, Georgia’s requirement ensures that students’ learning goes beyond rote memorization of facts, instead encouraging young people to develop civic skills. Students must identify and address issues of their choosing, ultimately presenting a capstone portfolio project based on their engagement in and understanding of the political process.

California is also developing criteria for a civic diploma seal. In 2018, former California Governor Jerry Brown signed Assembly Bill 24 into law,²⁷ which authorized the State Board of Education to develop civic seals criteria.²⁸ In order to achieve the Seal of Civic Engagement, the state must consider students’ successful completion of history, government, and civics courses, including courses that incorporate character education and voluntary participation in community service or extracurricular activities.²⁹ The seal will not be primarily based on test scores.³⁰ The details of the seal are being finalized, however, equity and access is a top priority in developing the civic seals criteria,³¹ so that all students have an opportunity to meet them.³²

As a policy contrast to diploma seals, Tennessee Governor Bill Lee announced the “Governor’s Civic Seal” in 2019. Governor Lee opted to indirectly impact students by targeting districts and schools, instead of employing the more commonly used diploma approach. Another important and noteworthy distinction with Tennessee’s civic seals is that Governor Lee allocated \$500,000 towards this initiative to ensure schools could “implemen[ting] high-quality civic education programs.” Tennessee’s approach prioritizes professional development for teachers, real-world civic activities, project-based assessment, and special recognition for local education agencies (LEAs) where at least 80 percent of schools have earned a civic seal.³³

The Tennessee Governor’s office is the public-facing lead of the civic seal program, with the Department of Education as the implementing partner, whereas Georgia, California, and Arizona have all carved out more prominent roles for their state departments of education to implement their diploma seal programs. Tennessee’s school-focused civic seal program is an indication of the policy momentum in favor of civic seals in states across the country. However, Tennessee’s emphasis on school recognition as an incentive for scaling civics education statewide, rather than prioritizing student access to comprehensive civics education as the primary lever of scale, may pose policy implementation challenges in terms of both equity and efficiency.

CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

The state examples above provided the Task Force with ample research and best practices to consider in proposing the criteria for New York’s Seal of Civic Readiness. As previously stated, GC is encouraged that the Task Force and the Education Department included a Seal of Civic Readiness, which would allow students to earn a diploma, in part, by earning the seal as an option for the “plus 1” portion of a 4+1 Humanities pathway to graduation.

The proposed Seal of Civic Readiness is a good first step towards a substantive policy shift in realizing the Education Department’s goal that all students achieve civic readiness by completion of twelfth grade. GC’s comparative analysis of available diploma seals for civic learning and participation indicates that New York’s proposed seal would place the state in the vanguard as it relates to civic diploma seals.

In order for the Seal of Civic Readiness to have its intended impact and the policy to reach its full promise, however, it must be coupled with sufficient professional development and coaching to ensure that educators obtain the knowledge and skills necessary to support students with achieving the seal.

Based on GC’s experience in teacher professional development, it is clear that there is a disparity in access to professional development to implement project-based learning in classrooms statewide. Without adequate funding for teacher professional development, schools and districts that have historically prioritized project-based will be ahead of the curve in supporting their students to achieve the seal. GC respectfully recommends that the Governor and New York State Legislature appropriate sufficient funding to ensure that all districts statewide can offer teachers professional development to support students with achieving the seal.

Based on GC’s research with select districts, states, and programs, it is estimated that statewide implementation of Action Civics will cost the state approximately \$10.8 million per year to ensure that all teachers receive the professional development and coaching support necessary to implement this project-based learning pedagogy. It is important that the Education Department focus on the equitable allocation of resources with a specific focus on high-need districts, including Title I schools, in order to ensure that this work supports students who attend schools in districts that have historically been under resourced.

Another important consideration in ensuring that the seal is equitably implemented in districts statewide is a mandate from the Education Department that *all districts* develop a plan for offering the seal. Without such a mandate, the Education Department runs the risk that students in districts that have historically been marginalized in our political process and do not have the resources to prioritize effective and culturally competent civics education will not be offered the opportunity to achieve the seal.

This is especially important as New York, the nation and the world face the current civic and racial reckoning unearthed during COVID-19, which has exposed societal inequities and hastened a movement for systemic change. Without a mandate that all districts offer the seal, the Education Department will only exacerbate systemic inequities plaguing historically marginalized communities statewide.

GC recommends that the Education Department postpone the proposed pilot during the 2020-21 school year if such a pilot is coupled with the allocation of state resources that would incentivize affluent districts, which have historically prioritized civics education, to deepen their civics education programming.

GC advocates vigorously that *all students*, but especially those in communities that have historically been marginalized in government decision-making, receive an effective Action Civics education.

Effective and culturally competent civics education is a vital tool in engaging youth in local politics and ensuring their sustained participation to collectively strengthen our local and national democracy. A pilot program that only deepens the existing chasm in the offering of effective civics education throughout the state will only deepen civic inequities at a time when the importance of ensuring students receive effective civics education cannot be understated. GC would support the Education Department's proposed pilot if it can be implemented in a way that recognizes and seeks to ameliorate historic educational inequities through the allocation of resources in an equitable manner.

GC recommends that the Education Department study the pilot and full implementation of the Seal of Civic Readiness and propose a plan for how to mandate that all students complete a civic capstone project as a graduation requirement. Action-oriented, experiential civics education requirements provide students the opportunity to engage in democracy, while developing crucial 21st century civic and workforce skills; and influence local government to improve their lives and the lives of those in their community.

While the Seal of Civic Readiness is a good first step towards ensuring that more students can demonstrate civic readiness before graduation, ultimately, the Education Department should update the PiG frameworks to include a civic capstone project requirement.

Finally, GC recommends that this plan include a mandate for a collective or group student civic capstone project rather than mandating that each student complete an individual student civic capstone project. Group capstone projects promote collaboration, teamwork, and civic skills useful in a twenty-first century democracy and workforce. Additionally, requiring students to create a group civic capstone rather than individual civic capstone projects ensures that educators have sufficient capacity to support student projects in a meaningful way.

GC respectfully offers the aforementioned recommendations to the Education Department and districts statewide as they consider their plan for educating youth to participate in our twenty-first century democracy.

The importance of effective and culturally responsive civic learning cannot be understated if New York seeks to eliminate the existing inequity in civic learning offerings statewide and ensure that all students graduate from high school civic ready with the knowledge, skills and actions, mindsets and experiences to actively participate in our twenty-first century democracy for the long-term.

ENDNOTES

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