



Service-Learning in Civic EducationTM

Reigniting a Strong Vibrant Democracy

OVERVIEW

After more than 40 years of theory, practice, and research on service-learning in the United States, [the National Youth Leadership Council \(NYLC\)](#), in partnership with the [Freudenberg Stiftung Foundation of Germany](#), is launching a three-year project in two high schools within the United States where school administration, teachers, and community want and need a **practical project to promote democracy** that connects to a multi-discipline high school curriculum. This project is developed on the basis of new findings on democracy distance on the one hand and democracy-relevant identification points of young people on the other, leveraging Matthew MacWilliams' research on what could reach, engage, mobilize and inspire young people for democratic engagement in a milieu-specific way.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Published in 2023, the study by Matthew MacWilliams on the state of "[Democracy in America](#)" shows a worryingly small number of young people stand firmly behind their democracy – in contrast, an encouraging number of 18-39 year-olds want to be involved in their neighborhoods and they espouse values such as freedom, community and equality before the law. They long for an end to polarization, for connectedness and self-efficacy.

Additionally, evidence suggests students in lower economic communities are doubly disadvantaged by a “civic empowerment gap” (Levinson, 2012) that handicaps their academic engagement at school and limits their exposure to opportunities to develop civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for full adult participation in democratic life.

If left unchecked, the decline in belief in democracy in the United States will create opportunities for authoritarian and self-interested parties to incite violent passions that have simmered beneath the surface of American society since its inception (MacWilliams, 2023).

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THEORY OF ACTION

For young people who feel disheartened by the complexities of democracy and politics at the state and national levels, the community offers a powerful avenue for making a tangible difference. Communities are the bedrock of a thriving democracy, where young people can directly impact the issues that shape their daily lives, if given the opportunity and support. Service-Learning in Civic Education (SLICE) offers or directs engaging service-learning experiences connected to academic subject matter and important community issues where young people can cultivate a sense of ownership and responsibility, fostering a deeper connection to the democratic process. The project's multi-pronged focus on policy, practice and leadership addresses civic empowerment gaps through the introduction of high-quality, community-focused learning that supports measurable academic and civic outcomes.

Service-Learning in Civic Education:

- Introduces a project design to support and enhance school and district priorities for civic engagement through rich community-focused learning experiences tied to teaching and learning strategies.
- Serves as a catalyst for bringing together diverse stakeholders – school administrators, educators, students, community partners focused on critical issues, and families – to model the principles of positive and engaged citizenship. By uniting these various groups, a powerful synergy emerges, exemplifying the collaborative spirit that lies at the heart of a thriving democratic society.
- Engages students in leading authentic learning as they identify community issues and problems and step up to assume responsibility and practice active citizenship.

This collaborative approach not only fosters a deeper understanding of civic processes but also instills a sense of shared responsibility and ownership among all participants. By witnessing firsthand the positive impact of their collective efforts, stakeholders become living embodiments of engaged citizenship. They inspire others to embrace their roles as active contributors to a vibrant democratic society.

Project Goals

- Provide opportunities for high school students to participate in sustainable, inquiry-based, hands-on, engaging service-learning experiences designed to develop standards-aligned student academic knowledge.
- Develop high-quality local civic engagement opportunities and experiences especially focused on taking informed action.
- Provide high school students with a platform to share their voices and actively participate in community-driven change-making processes.

Service-Learning in Civic Education recognizes the power of collective action. This project facilitates partnerships between students, local organizations, and educators. By working collaboratively on projects that address pressing issues, students gain firsthand experience in identifying community needs, developing solutions, and implementing action plans.

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Accompanying the project, all partners and the participating high schools will commit to an independent external evaluation led by researcher Matthew MacWilliams, designed to measure the impact of the program on the targeted student outcomes, and on the impact of community-focused learning on student awareness, understanding, and practice of citizenship and civic responsibility and overall belief in democracy. This evaluation will enable the partners to understand the broad impacts of the program and strengthen the research base for community-focused learning. Second, the evaluation will allow participating sites to understand whether and how their participation in the program is helping them achieve civic outcomes for their students.

We expect that the project evaluation will document:

- Increases in student academic performance within core curricula
- Increases in civic learning and engagement for students
- Increases in understanding between community engagement and democracy
- Increases in belief in democracy

PARTNER SCHOOLS WILL RECEIVE THE FOLLOWING FOR THREE SCHOOL YEARS:

- On-site training of educators, administrators, community partners and students by NYLC staff; training shall include multiple coaching sessions for participating teachers each year
- One three-day in-person gathering/training per year
- Development of a professional development plan for each participating high school, to include assistance and coaching in implementing these plans (a “train the trainer” approach will be utilized, to encourage both growing to scale and sustainability)
- Specialized training for community partners identified by the school and district, to familiarize them with the goals of the learning strategies in use, as well as in strategic and sustainable partnership development
- Up-front commitment to long-term program sustainability by building cohorts of educators trained in the model, who will then assist with training and support of additional cohorts as the program expands
- Financial support for expenses that schools may encounter while implementing the program (dependent on available funding and district need)
- Consulting services to support educator and program facilitator practice, as well as the development of school and district policy necessary for implementation
- Incorporation throughout the project of a rigorous evaluation component

The results of this pilot project will be able to prove the extent to which civic education and engagement as well as students’ understanding of democracy is positively impacted through the use of service-learning pedagogy. The findings and the model will be published by the partner organizations.

Together, we will empower a generation of young citizens with a deeper understanding of democratic values and their role within society.

Contact us to learn how your school can participate.