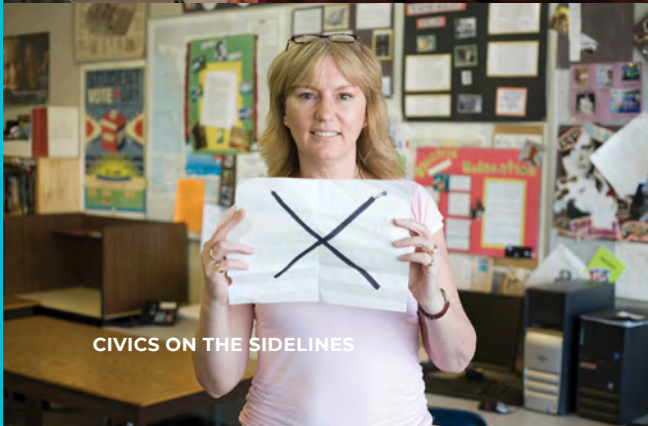


CIVICS ON THE SIDELINES

A National Survey of Canadian Educators on Citizenship Education





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Acknowledgments



CIVIX is a Canadian charity dedicated to strengthening democracy through experiential civic education. Our resources and programming are designed to bring democracy to life in the classroom and empower students with the knowledge and skills to become active and informed citizens.

For more information visit civix.ca or email hello@civix.ca.

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Introduction

In the winter of 2022, as Ottawa and other parts of Canada were still contending with the effects and implications of the convoy protests, a familiar refrain echoed across media channels: Canadians lack civic education and, presumably, need more of it (see, for example, O'Neill, 2022; Fullan, 2022; Toor, 2022; Van Rythoven, 2022). This was to be expected. As many education scholars note, calls for civic education reform emerge almost like clockwork alongside social crises (Osborne, 2000; Sears and Hyslop-Marginson, 2007; Westheimer, 2019; Miles, 2021). But what, exactly, do Canadian students lack, and what do they need?

Typically, calls for civic education emphasize the need for increased civic knowledge and awareness, treating citizenship as something students simply “learn” and “know.” Yet as Sears and Hyslop-Marginson (2007) note, not only do we not have a strong sense of what, exactly, Canadian students do not know, the type of knowledge that is often measured on surveys or referenced in opinion pieces often has little relation to the actual practice of citizenship (see also Barabas et al, 2014; Boudreau and Lupia, 2011). To suggest, for example, that the convoy protests could have been prevented if only Canadians were better informed about the nuances of coalition governments (or any other process knowledge) not only ignores the complex social, political, and historical roots of the convoy itself (a topic ripe for any advanced civics class), but it also reduces civic education to an individualistic endeavor at odds with the essence of citizenship.

Civics, to be sure, includes the formal study of political processes, the role of government, and the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. At a more fundamental level, however, citizenship education is about community and how we relate to one another and live together as a public. It is about thinking critically and deeply about how we address social issues and engage in the democratic processes through which we can try to create the changes we want to see.

We advocate for a type of civic education that is authentic and experiential, that makes visible the intertwining of students' lived experiences and larger social and political structures. It is a type of civic education that does not just tell students about how our political systems work, but rather one that encourages them to understand, interrogate, engage with, and even challenge these systems to build a version of Canada in which they want to live.

This type of civic education is full of conflict, tension, and contradiction. It asks students to question what it means to be a citizen, to analyze complex problems from multiple contrasting viewpoints, to wrestle with challenging ideas and controversial issues, to examine and re-examine their own beliefs and opinions, to consider their personal priorities alongside those of their community, and, ultimately, to make difficult decisions. This is hard work for students.

It's also hard work for teachers. To paraphrase civic education expert Alan Sears (2018), teaching civics isn't rocket science; it's actually much more complicated than teaching rocket science. In order to deliver high quality civic education to their students grounded in best practices, teachers require adequate time, training, resourcing, and institutional support.

Today, young Canadians are asked to confront and contend with a variety of distinct and complex issues ranging from political disengagement and rising anti-democratic sentiments to social polarization, and rampant disinformation. All too often, they are not given the tools required to meet the moment.

We agree that citizenship education is both essential and severely underprioritized. Canada certainly has a civic education problem, but Canadian students don't simply need “more” of it. They need consistent and equitable access to high-quality civic education that engages them as active, critically thinking citizens in their own right. They need a form of citizenship education that helps them contextualize their society so that they can better envision their role within it.

The Report

From our perspective, understanding the actual state of civic education in Canada today starts with teachers. Teachers are at the frontlines of our democracy and are often asked to take on much of the burden of developing young peoples' civic competencies. As such, we need to make sure their voices are heard and that they are adequately equipped and supported.

Due to Canada's decentralized education system, there is a paucity of national data on the state of citizenship education in Canada, with the last major national study dating back to A.B. Hodgetts' 1968 book, *What Culture? What Heritage? A Study of Civic Education in Canada*. Certainly, much has changed since 1968. We see this report as an opportunity to contribute to what we believe should be a national conversation about citizenship in the classroom and to engage with the strong body of global research on citizenship education.

To help us understand the practice of civic education in Canada, CIVIX contracted Abacus Data to assess Canadian K-12 teachers' perceptions of civic education, their teaching methods, and the barriers they face.

DATA FOR THIS REPORT COMES FROM 3 SOURCES

1 A survey of 1,922 education professionals from across the country.

2 A series of four focus groups, comprising between 5-9 teachers each, meant to expand upon the survey results and gain added insight into what citizenship education looks like in the classroom.

3 Individual interviews with experienced civic educators conducted by CIVIX staff. The goal of these interviews was to develop an understanding of how teachers who prioritize citizenship education implement civic learning in the classroom.

KEY TAKEAWAYS



Civics is well-represented across provincial and territorial curricula but severely deprioritized in practice.



Teachers overwhelmingly support incorporating civic education across the curriculum, but it's not happening in practice.



There is a disconnect between the type of civic education teachers would like to teach and the type they feel they are expected to teach.



Civic education in Canada is inequitable, with only a small minority of students consistently engaging in practices that best develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of citizenship.



Educator training in civics is severely lacking at all levels. As a result, survey respondents feel that many teachers tasked with teaching civics are uninterested in the subject or are unqualified to teach it.

“Civic education is essentially the foundation of establishing a classroom community. And that is something that is ongoing and that is a touchstone of how we begin, and every single day, we're taking on that democratic approach”

— NOVA SCOTIA ELEMENTARY TEACHER

Methodology & Teacher Profile

The survey was conducted with two populations:

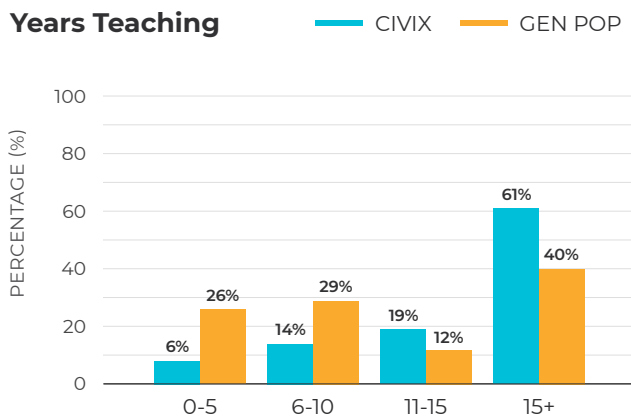
1 A CIVIX sample taken from our internal email lists (n= 1406). We invited all teachers in our database to participate.

2 A general population (Gen Pop) sample (n=516). This sample was weighted by gender and region of the country.

Educators from all 10 provinces completed the survey, but we unfortunately did not receive any responses from the territories.

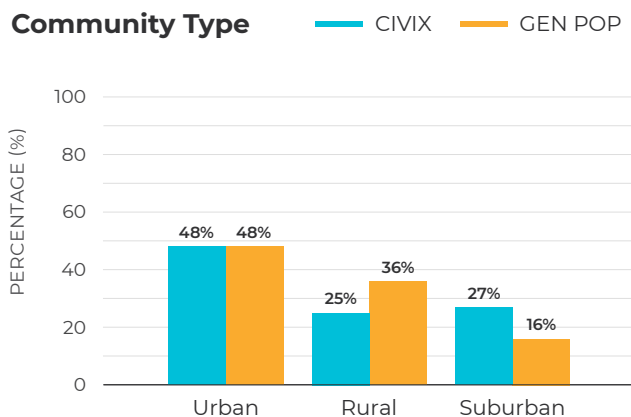
Unless otherwise indicated, the results in the report represent the CIVIX sample. These teachers are, overall, more experienced, more likely to be invested in civic education, and more likely to be

teaching classes that directly involve citizenship than the Gen Pop sample (e.g. social studies classes). The CIVIX sample also represents a much larger range of grade-levels, though it skews more toward the elementary and middle school grades. In instances where there were notable discrepancies between the two populations, we have included results from both samples.



Subjects Taught¹

	CIVIX	GEN POP
All Subjects (Elementary)	46%	14%
Arts	10%	11%
Health & Physical Education	9%	10%
Language Arts	28%	40%
Math	12%	26%
Science	11%	21%
Social Studies	45%	33%
Technology	5%	12%
Other	14%	19%



¹Please note that these totals will not add up to 100%. Many high school teachers teach multiple subjects and across disciplines and will have selected more than one of the options.

Citizenship in the Curriculum

The Big Picture

First, some good news: teachers firmly believe in the importance of civic education. Survey results show that teachers almost unanimously agree that it is important for students to learn about politics and government at school. This was true across both samples though, unsurprisingly, CIVIX teachers were more likely to be in strong agreement.

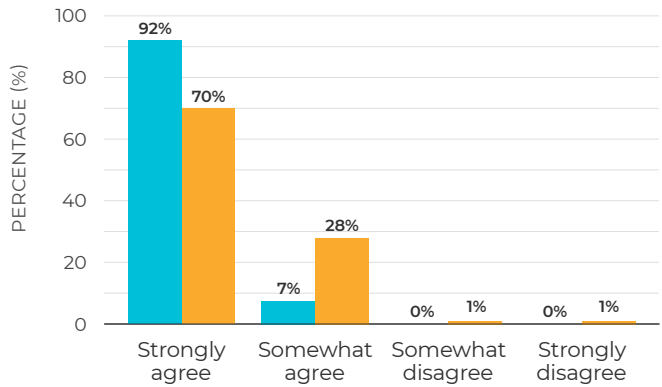
Teachers also, by and large, see value in teaching their students about politics and government, though strong agreement is substantially less among the Gen Pop sample with a smaller proportion of social studies educators.

Teachers are invested in civics, but they are not quite as confident in teaching it. Although the number of teachers who generally agree that they are confident is high, fewer than half of teachers express a high level of confidence, even among the CIVIX sample of generally more experienced social studies teachers. Among the Gen Pop sample, a quarter of teachers stated that they are not confident teaching the subject.

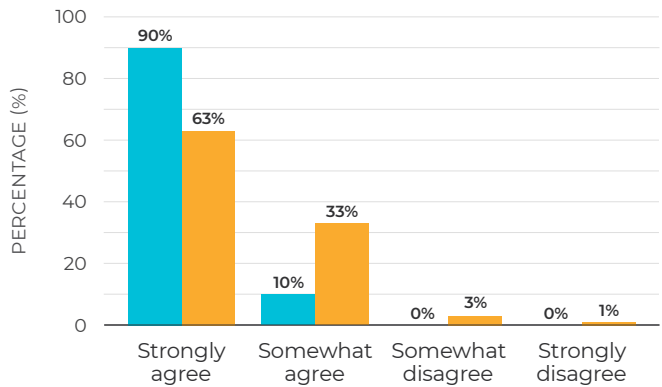


CIVIX GEN POP

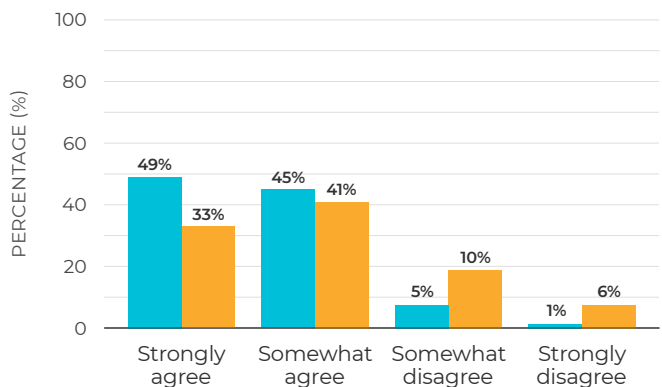
I think it's important for students to learn about politics and government in school.



I see value in teaching my students about politics and government.



I am confident teaching about politics and government.



A Brief Overview

Across Canada, developing the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of citizenship is largely (though not exclusively) the responsibility of the social studies curriculum, with many social studies curriculum documents explicitly naming citizenship as the subject's *raison d'être*.

The Alberta curriculum, for example, states that “social studies provides opportunities for students to develop the attitudes, skills and knowledge that will enable them to become engaged, active, informed and responsible citizens.” British Columbia identifies giving students “the knowledge, skills, and competencies to be active, informed citizens who are able to think critically” as the “primary goal of Social Studies.” On the other side of the country, curriculum documents in the Atlantic provinces state bluntly that “social studies, more than any other curriculum area, is vital in developing citizenship,” as it “embodies the main principles of democracy.”

In the elementary grades, civics' place within social studies means that it is taught as part of an

interdisciplinary mix of subjects that primarily includes history and geography but that may also engage with elements of philosophy, economics, and law, among other subjects. The specific learning outcomes related to civic education to be met in each class differ by grade level and across provinces/territories.²

At the secondary level, some provinces have mandatory civics courses in grades 9 (Nova Scotia) or 10 (Ontario, New Brunswick as of 2023), but most provinces and territories simply mandate that students take a set number of courses that fall under the umbrella of social studies.³ This typically amounts to fewer than one social studies course per year, and in many provinces and territories, it is possible to essentially opt out of social studies altogether in the senior years.⁴ As our survey and focus group results make clear, at both the elementary and secondary levels, the extent to which citizenship is highlighted within a specific class often depends both on the individual course and the interests, priorities, and capacity of the teacher.

² For instance, learning about the role of government is a Grade 3 expectation in New Brunswick but a Grade 5 expectation in Ontario.

³ At the secondary level, some provinces, like Alberta and British Columbia, continue to offer broad interdisciplinary social studies courses while others, like Ontario, take a disciplinary approach focusing on subjects like history, geography, economics, and political science as separate disciplines. In this latter approach, the relationship between the subject matter and citizenship tends to be less explicit and relies more on individual teachers to frame the course through a citizenship lens.

⁴ Alberta is the only province that requires students to take at least one social studies course with an explicit citizenship education component every year of their academic career. Saskatchewan requires students to take a minimum of two social studies courses between grades 11 and 12, but students can opt to fulfill these credits only in grade 12. It is also worth noting that some provinces also offer advanced elective courses in civic education, such as Manitoba's Grade 12 “Citizenship and Sustainability” course that emphasizes civic action projects.

“I think citizenship is the big goal for me as a teacher, and I think, broadly speaking, the goal of education.”

— BRITISH COLUMBIA HIGH SCHOOL TEACHER



Experts in social studies education have noted that citizenship competencies being highlighted in the curriculum document front matter does not mean that these big picture goals are being highlighted in the classroom. When analyzing the rollout and implementation of the revised Alberta social studies curriculum, for instance, Gibson (2012) found that neither teachers nor students thought about the goals of social studies in terms of citizenship. Moreover, as Evans et al. (2020) argue, “provincial policy guidance is often viewed as strong in rhetoric but vague in terms of what goals are to be given priority and/or what depth of coverage is expected.”

The tension between curriculum rhetoric and classroom practice was a major theme of both the survey and focus group findings.

Overall, educators across the country are relatively satisfied with their curricula, with nearly three quarters (73%) of teachers agreeing that the curriculum for their subject area supports the type of civic education they want to provide, though only one quarter (24%) of all teachers agreed strongly.

In focus groups, teachers expanded on their conflicted feelings about how citizenship education fits into the social studies curriculum. On the one hand, teachers feel that the curriculum allows them the flexibility and professional autonomy to approach citizenship education however they choose, with one junior high teacher from Alberta stating that she feels “empowered” by her curriculum. On the other hand, educators expressed concern that the same curricular flexibility that allows some teachers to highlight civic education and thread citizenship throughout their classes may also result

in citizenship being diluted if an individual teacher does not care about civics or does not know how to integrate it into the classroom.⁵

A teacher from British Columbia, for instance, explained how loose curricular integration can make civics seem optional even within social studies if teachers don’t actively make room for it:

“It’s just a bullet point as part of our [Grade 10 Social Studies course]. And I don’t know if this was the idea when [the curriculum] was written, but what it becomes is, for example, I have a colleague who is finishing up her [class], and she’s going, ‘Oh my gosh, I haven’t even taught [civics] yet.’ So she’s going to teach it for maybe a couple of weeks at the end of June, kind of as an afterthought. And to me, that’s not giving it nearly enough time and effort and energy that it needs.”

An experienced citizenship educator, also from British Columbia, expanded on how the flexibility of the curriculum can be a double-edged sword, especially for newer teachers who might not have the content knowledge or confidence to integrate civics into their classrooms:

“You can find ways to [incorporate civics and citizenship], you can find things to tie it to, but it’s not laid out. So a new teacher coming in is not going to see [how to make connections to] how democracy works, or how our legislators run or how our federal government operates...The big ideas in the B.C. curriculum make it easier. And the core competencies that they look for in students make it easier. But when it comes to content...you have to really make it happen.”

⁵ Of course, the same could be said for any of the disciplines that make up social studies. There have been concerns, for instance, that history is deprioritized in social studies (Jones, 2022).

Curricular Integration

Teachers at all levels — including those who do not primarily teach social studies — overwhelmingly believe that civics is a cross-curricular subject, with 90% of respondents agreeing that it should be taught across the curriculum.

As one British Columbia teacher explained during the focus groups, citizenship should not just be the responsibility of social studies teachers:

“I feel like humanities people oftentimes take the lion’s share of especially civic issues. And I feel like there’s a huge role for that to play in science and mathematics.”

At least at the level of rhetoric, educational policy tends to agree. Nearly all provincial and territorial curricula explicitly name citizenship as a core trans-disciplinary global competency, or equivalent. For example, in 2013, Ontario introduced the *Citizenship Education Framework* to bring “citizenship education to life, not only in social studies, history, and geography, but in many other subjects as well. The Ontario curriculum also explicitly identifies “global citizenship and sustainability” as one of seven transferable skills meant to be threaded throughout grades and disciplines.⁶

Manitoba’s K-12 Education Action Plan, launched in 2022, puts forth a vision in which all students “have capacity to play an active role in shaping their future and be active citizens,” and its Framework for Learning lists Citizenship as a global competency necessary to achieving this goal. The Atlantic Canada Framework for Essential Graduation Competencies, endorsed by the four Atlantic provinces in 1995 and updated in 2015, similarly identifies citizenship as a cross-curricular competency and states that all learners are expected to “recognize the principles and actions of citizens in just, pluralistic, and democratic societies” and “demonstrate the disposition and skills necessary for effective citizenship.”

Civic education should be implemented across the curriculum



- Strongly agree | 46%
- Somewhat agree | 45%
- Somewhat disagree | 8%
- Strongly disagree | 1%

⁶ Global citizenship, as its name implies, assumes a much more expansive definition of citizenship than that of a traditional civics course which focuses on issues at a national, provincial/territorial, or local scale. Nonetheless, many of the skills and dispositions of global citizenship overlap with those of more traditional citizenship education, and a strong civic education can serve as the foundation for global citizenship.



My school integrates civic education across the curriculum



According to the educators we surveyed, however, these policy goals do not reflect reality. Only 36% of teachers said that their school integrates civic education across the curriculum, with only 5% strongly agreeing. These numbers were relatively consistent across provinces, but elementary teachers — especially those in urban settings — were most likely to agree that civics was integrated across the curriculum at their schools (48% agreed). High school teachers were less likely to see curricular integration at their schools.⁷

To reiterate, it is one thing to state that active citizenship is a goal of education, and something else entirely to ensure that all educators have a robust understanding of citizenship education and are able to prioritize it to the extent the curriculum suggests they should. Integrating civic education across the curriculum is an admirable goal, but it requires clearly defined outcomes, resourcing, training, and time. Without adequate support, even the strongest policy documents result in little more than what Hughes et al. (2010) refer to as an “unfunded mandate.”⁸

Teachers in the focus groups were clear that curricular integration without a clear implementation plan or without teachers prepared and motivated to engage with civic issues can result in an overall dilution of civics. This concern echoes international research that shows that cross-curricular approaches to citizenship education can fail if they do not incorporate clear learning goals, a strong content base, and systems

⁷ This discrepancy is most likely due to the fact that any sort of curricular integration is more logistically challenging in high schools, where disciplines tend to be compartmentalized and taught by different teachers.

⁸ In their study, Hughes et al. also identify seven areas where jurisdictions could develop capacity to support citizenship education. They found Canada to be lagging in all seven.

“I feel like humanities people oftentimes take the lion’s share of especially civic issues. And I feel like there’s a huge role for that to play in science and mathematics.”





of evaluation and accountability (Claes and Stals, 2021). As one high school teacher from Ontario put it:

"I think the concern with integration is the quality of integration you're going to get... You probably want qualified people integrating those concepts, which in civics can be incredibly difficult."

At the same time, some of the focus group teachers provided evidence of what cross-curricular attention to civic education might look like. One elementary teacher from Nova Scotia detailed her approach to curricular integration:

"I think it is integrated a lot in different subjects, especially language. I always do my social studies or my science through my language block. That way, language is more purposeful and has more direction... There's always math you can bring into social studies... When we did the Student Vote, [we looked] at predicting and estimating who would be the winner."

This teacher further explained how her students develop their oral communication skills by discussing pressing political issues and develop their writing skills by writing letters to their MLA or MP. These are meaningful experiences for students, but they are the result of an individual teacher being interested enough in citizenship education to take the initiative to implement these activities. These experiences are certainly not consistent across districts or even schools, and it is likely that other students in the same school don't receive equal opportunities to practice similar skills of active citizenship.

Notably, these examples come from an elementary teacher who is responsible for teaching all subjects and is thus more easily able to teach across disciplines. High school teachers were invested in the idea of curricular integration — one teacher noted "getting kids excited about that kind of [civic] engagement and relevant current events happening is something that can happen in multiple different classes" — but were more likely to be concerned with how civic education fit in with existing disciplinary course content. For instance, an Ontario teacher remarked:

If you put [civics] in an English course, you would need to make sure that it was in a novel study or something like that that linked very, very closely with what it is that you are trying to do. That would be the only way you could put it in English.

One experienced high school teacher from Alberta noted how other teachers require guidance and support to make curricular connections. She detailed how, during elections, she helps teachers in other disciplines integrate a citizenship component into their classes:

"My math colleague analyzed historical [voting] statistics [with her students] and made a cross curricular project out of it. I will give things to the English teachers, because they have to analyze and interpret sources. So it's like if you're doing this anyway, can you just do this in relation to the election? The art class does campaign posters so that the kids who may not be in social studies [can] go out in the hallway and [see] platforms for the parties and the local candidates and what they stand for... Really everybody in the school gets involved."

Prioritizing Civics

The difficulties of integrating citizenship education across the curriculum can be attributed, at least in part, to what teachers perceive as a general deprioritization of citizenship education within the school system.

Nearly two thirds of teachers said that civic education is not a priority at their school compared to other topics. Agreement that civics is not a priority was especially high among teachers from Nova Scotia (77%) and Ontario (68%) and lowest among teachers from Alberta (56%). This sentiment was also slightly higher among high school teachers.

In survey responses and in the focus groups, educators attributed this deprioritization to an emphasis on Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM). Sixty-three percent of respondents, including those who primarily teach STEM classes, agreed that civics and social studies have become lower priority in their schools due to an increased focus on STEM, with teachers from Ontario and Atlantic Canada agreeing most strongly (72%). Agreement was also highest among secondary school teachers who were more likely than elementary teachers to “strongly agree” that civics and social studies have been deprioritized at their schools.

In focus groups, some teachers detailed how civics is dismissed or ignored in their schools. This sentiment was especially strong among Ontario teachers who teach the mandatory Grade 10 Civics and Citizenship course. Introduced into the Ontario high school curriculum for the 1998-1999 school year, this half-credit course is currently the longest-running standalone civics course in the country. Despite a number of revisions, however, teachers feel like it is still not treated as an important class:

“Civics is always put down. I know the government is focusing on STEM and it’s all about STEM, STEM, STEM. And not everyone is geared for that...I think it’s important to know [how] to be a citizen, a contributing citizen in society. It does not need to be science, tech, [or] math related.”

Compared to other topics, civics education is not a priority at my school



“It’s all the math and the science and tech that’s, I think, the priority, and that’s where all the money is. So [civics is] not something that will get money or get funding, and it’s something that’s just usually pushed to the side.”

Other Ontario teachers described civics as “not being on the radar” or as “the forgotten course.” One newer teacher of the Civics and Citizenship course reflected on a general lack of support she has received, saying that she has “never had a conversation about what I’m teaching in civics or what’s going on [in class] or had any direction.” Teachers also detailed how this lack of attention has real consequences on the quality of student learning, from funding no longer being earmarked for civics-related events or field trips to a student being pulled from civics class to make up a math test so they wouldn’t have to miss math class.

Agenda

- Spelling: Gr. 4 p. 12 & 13
Gr. 5 p. 20 | ss 1, 4, 5, 6, 7
due wed.
 - LANG-POWER P. 6
 - Journal - due Thursday
 - MATH GR 4^{3a} 2abc 3a 4a 5, 6
GR 5 p. 36 | 2 4 6 Reflect
- SOCIAL STUDIES

The notion that schools must choose between STEM and citizenship is a false binary. In fact, as Nancy Brickhouse (2022) reminds us, teaching STEM subjects as though they are not intimately intertwined with everyday civic life can have serious negative consequences, contributing to the “disconnect between scientific communities and ordinary people.”

Classrooms should be spaces where students are encouraged to make these connections. An experienced middle-school educator from Alberta, for example, described how a citizenship lens can enhance STEM lessons and connect them more deeply to students' lives:

“Last school year, we fit in a cross curricular activity with science about the single use plastic ban, and talked about all those impacts. How did that impact our citizenship, our identity, our quality of life? What does that mean from the different stakeholders' perspectives? In the past, we've done one with math as well, about water quality, and we tied in our collective rights with the water quality on reservations.”

Cross-curricular citizenship education, as this comment suggests, does not necessitate a complete curricular restructuring. A cross-curricular approach does not come with an expectation that the math teacher, for instance, will spend a week discussing the workings of government, nor does it imply that citizenship should be so diffused across the curriculum so as to not be the responsibility of any individual teacher. Rather, it suggests that the challenge of encouraging students to think about citizenship holistically can be shared among teachers, and that the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of citizenship can be reinforced through other subjects in ways that enrich those subjects and make them more meaningful for students. Cross-curricular integration, in other words, is less about shoe-horning civics into other subjects and more about teaching all subjects through a lens of citizenship and democracy.⁹

⁹ For more on the relationship between citizenship and STEM, see Sears & Clark (2020).

Citizenship in the Classroom

Types of Citizenship Education

In order to contextualize what teachers do in the classroom, we first wanted to gain insight into their personal understanding of civic education and its goals.

Educators' understanding of what citizenship education looks like in the classroom likely begins with the curriculum. Education scholars have shown how policy documents put forth specific conceptions of citizenship that provide insight into how provinces and territories expect citizenship to be taught (Westheimer & Kahne, 2003; Kenelly & Llewellyn, 2011; Bickmore, 2014; Broom, 2015).¹⁰

In their influential analysis of civic education programs in the United States, Joel Westheimer and Joseph Kahne (2004) identified three recurring “visions” of citizenship: the personally responsible citizen, the participatory citizen, and the justice-oriented citizen. Curricula that privilege personally responsible citizenship focus on individual morality and character-building in ways that have few explicit connections to politics or democracy. They conflate citizenship with “good character” and conceptualize the “good” citizen as someone who is honest, hard-working, and law-abiding. The participatory model, on the other hand, defines good citizens as “those who actively participate in the civic affairs and social life of the community at the local, state, or national level.” Curricula that emphasize this model prioritize teaching students about the workings of government, the rights and responsibilities of democratic citizenship, and ways to participate actively in democracy. Finally, the justice-oriented model shares the participatory model's interest in civic engagement, but it also pushes students to analyze and think deeply about the root causes of social issues and about systems of power.¹¹

These three types of citizenship are not meant to represent a hierarchy, though conceptions of citizenship education that emphasize personal responsibility in an individualistic, apolitical manner tend to be seen as outdated at best and dangerously anti-democratic at worst (Osborne, 2005; Sears and Hughes, 2006; Winton, 2007; Boyd, 2010). More importantly for the practice of civic education, these models are also not meant to represent a continuum where one type seamlessly develops into the next. For example, students do not develop a systemic understanding of political issues via osmosis by learning about how bills become laws. In order for students to develop a justice-oriented understanding of citizenship, they must engage with activities that *directly* address that form of citizenship. Similarly, an emphasis on systemic analysis of issues alone does not guarantee that students will develop any understanding of how they can act on those issues in meaningful ways by engaging with political systems.

These three models are certainly not the only ways to think about citizenship, but they are very useful for thinking about different ways citizenship can be taught and practiced, especially as they increasingly influence curriculum development in Canada.¹² While analyzing in detail the different ways in which curricula from across Canada conceptualize citizenship is outside the scope of this report, we *are* interested in how educators conceive of civic education, acknowledging that their approach to civic education in the classroom may be shaped, but not fully determined, by the expectations set forth in their curricula or in the culture of their schools.

¹⁰ As Westheimer and Kahne note, despite the connotations that often accompany the phrase “social justice,” justice-oriented citizenship is a wholly non-partisan concept and can account for differing perspectives on how justice can and should be achieved. Asking students to examine the roots of the housing crisis, for example, can spur responses from across the political spectrum.

¹¹ These conceptions of citizenship also echo Vanessa Andreotti's (2006) distinction between “soft” and “critical” approaches to global citizenship education. For Andreotti, a critical approach necessitates that any political action is preceded by analyzing the thinking critically about systems of power.

¹² The new Grade 10 Civics course in New Brunswick, for instance, lists the three types of citizenship as a key concept for teachers to address with students. The curriculum document for the Manitoba Grade 12 Citizenship and Sustainability course also explicitly references these three conceptions of citizenship.

Citizenship Education Over Time

In focus groups, longtime social studies teachers reflected on how their teaching has changed over the years and, with it, the model of citizenship that they prioritize in class. They noted that curricula are concerned less with basic knowledge and facts about government and democracy and instead emphasize engaging with issues and promoting critical thinking, coinciding with a move toward inquiry-based learning more generally. Educators also mentioned how more contemporary curriculum documents treat students as citizens in their own right with the capacity to make complex decisions and effect change. As one elementary teacher explained:

"I've been teaching for 24 years so I'm going back to the days where we would get the kids to memorize facts. So of course, that has changed so much in 24 years to now, where we are getting them to think for themselves and to question."

— ELEMENTARY TEACHER

Educators also commented on the increasing scope of what they are asked to teach under the umbrella of citizenship education, a trend which again points to how broadly defined civic education tends to be at the policy level and which speaks to how different provinces and territories conceive of citizenship

altogether.¹³ Topics that teachers are now expected to address include digital literacy with a focus of assessing and evaluating online information, financial literacy, and Indigenous governance. Recent changes to the Quebec curriculum even include sex education as part of the new Citizenship and Culture program.

Teachers tended to frame some of these changes positively, noting that students are especially receptive to topics related to Indigenous education and digital literacy. At the same time, these topics are not simple additions to an already jam-packed social studies curriculum, but highly complex topics with their own unique outcomes. Each requires specific training in content knowledge and teaching strategies to ensure it is taught effectively. Recent studies have shown, for example, that many common approaches to teaching digital literacy do not help students meet intended goals (Wineburg et al, 2020; Pavlounis et al. 2021). These topics also require significant classroom time, adding breadth to curricula that social studies teachers already struggle to implement in the time available. The expanded expectations placed upon citizenship education are understandable, but if these expectations are not accompanied by training, resourcing, and institutional prioritization, teachers will not be in a position to succeed.

¹³ Scholars like Peter Levine (2007) and Alan Sears (2014) argue that the sheer number of specific outcomes that tend to be associated with citizenship education has made citizenship difficult to evaluate and assess in a meaningful way.



Civics in Practice

When asked to describe which model of citizenship best characterizes their approach to civic education, no focus group teacher framed citizenship in terms of character education or personal responsibility. Instead, many foregrounded the importance of both the participatory and justice-oriented models, with some describing how the age of the students and the preparedness of the class can influence what types of citizenship are foregrounded.

“I approach it...as a participatory course. We do a really quick crash course about systems and fundamentals. And then kind of shock and awe them with engaging stories that are really related to the student experience”

— ONTARIO HIGH SCHOOL TEACHER

“I really push them to be more participatory. But then as we shift to grade six and we get into looking at how Canada interacts with the rest of the world, I think I push them a little bit further, to look at social justice and how they can sort of tie the two together.”

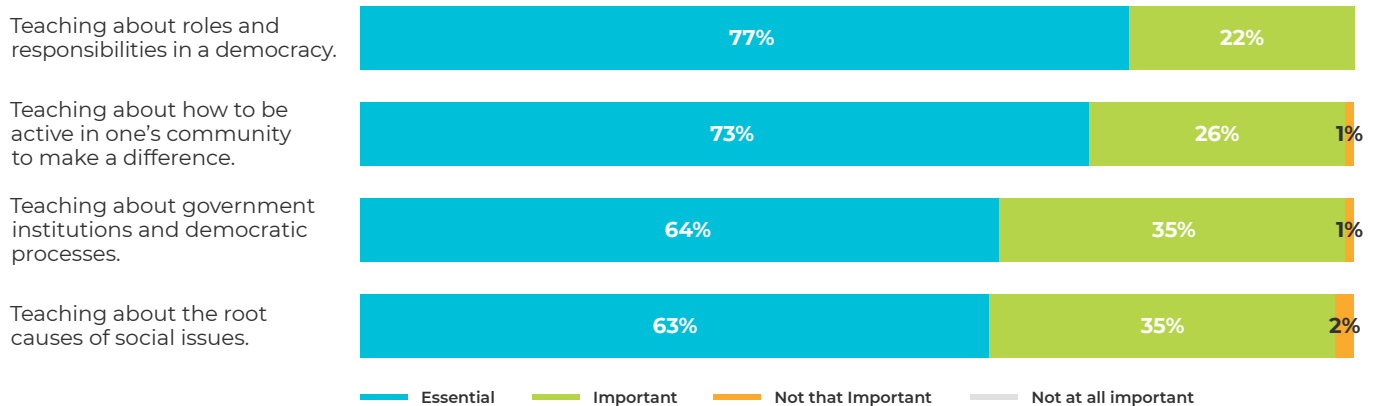
— ONTARIO ELEMENTARY TEACHER

“I also feel that it really depends on year to year. You know, sometimes you may have a class that is really keen to participate in more social justice or be more active. And so those years you may do more of that compared to other years you may have learners that are a little more passive”

— BC ELEMENTARY TEACHER



In your opinion, how important are the following components of civic education?



Survey results revealed that, on the whole, teachers prioritize the participatory model of citizenship and primarily see their role as preparing students to participate actively in democracy and in their communities. When asked to assess the importance of four components of civic education, teachers were nearly unanimous that all of the listed components were important, and a majority of teachers said that all components were essential, but “teaching about roles and responsibilities in a democracy” and “teaching about how to be active in one’s community” were deemed “essential” by significantly more teachers.

This was consistent across grade levels. Overall, middle school and high school teachers rated all of the components as more essential than elementary teachers, but “teaching about roles and responsibilities in a democracy” was still rated the most essential (81%) and “teaching about the root causes of social issues” was still rated the least essential (67%) among middle and high school teachers.¹⁴

Teaching about roles and responsibilities in democracy is an important part of citizenship education, provided that they are contextualized properly for students. As many education scholars observe, there is nothing inherently democratic about *learning* about the responsibilities of citizenship if students are not also encouraged to practice them (Kahne and Westheimer, 2003; Bennett, 2007; Sears et al., 2014; Scott et al. 2022). Moreover, a focus on rights and responsibilities threatens to alienate students if it is not connected to issues students care about or if it puts forth an idealistic conception of citizenship that students feel is not representative of their civic identities. As suggested by many of the focus group participants, teaching about civic participation works best when students are able to understand in the context of their lived experiences and are given the opportunity to think critically about the affordances and limitations of political systems.

¹⁴ The Gen Pop sample was also nearly unanimous that all components are at least “important,” though the percentage of respondents who rated each component as “essential” was lower. The Gen Pop sample also reflected the CIVIX sample in the two highest ranked choices, but they ranked “teaching about government institutions and democratic processes” as the least essential component (53%) and “teaching about the root causes of social issues” as the second least essential (59%). This is due at least in part to the larger proportion of middle and high school teachers in the Gen Pop sample. In both samples, high school teachers were more likely than elementary teachers to say that teaching about root causes of social issues is an essential component of civic education.

Teacher vs. School System Priorities

In order for teachers to feel empowered to deliver high quality civic education, it is important they feel that their priorities are in line with those of their school.

Survey results revealed a disconnect between what types of citizenship educators think they should be prioritizing and what types they think their school system prioritizes.

In order to better understand how educators understand civic education within the context of their schools, we presented teachers with a list of ten items, each aligned with one of the three models of citizenship. We asked teachers to choose the five items they think their school should prioritize and then asked them to select the five items they think their school system currently prioritizes.¹⁵

Teachers indicated that they feel their school systems prioritize a version of civic education that falls somewhere between the personally responsible and participatory conceptions of citizenship, with schools wanting to produce citizens who are knowledgeable about how the political system works, have an appreciation for Canadian democratic institutions, and who follow the rules and laws of society.¹⁶ While 62% of teachers also agree that teaching students the basics of the political system is very important, they tend to think their schools should prioritize a form of civics grounded in thinking critically about political systems, discussing political issues, and engaging with the community.

¹⁵ Teachers may feel pressure from a variety of sources at the school, district, or provincial levels. We used the generic term "school system" to try to capture all of these institutional sources outside of individual teachers' control in order to get a general sense of what teachers feel is being prioritized.

¹⁶ It should be noted that educator responses suggest that an emphasis on following the rules and laws of society decreases as students get older, as elementary teachers selected this option as a system priority at a higher rate than middle and high school teachers (63% vs. 49%). Teachers of younger students were also more likely to say that this is something that *should* be prioritized.



Two additional discrepancies stand out that are not reflected in these charts and that further indicate that teachers value a critical, justice-oriented model of civic education much more than they think their school systems do.

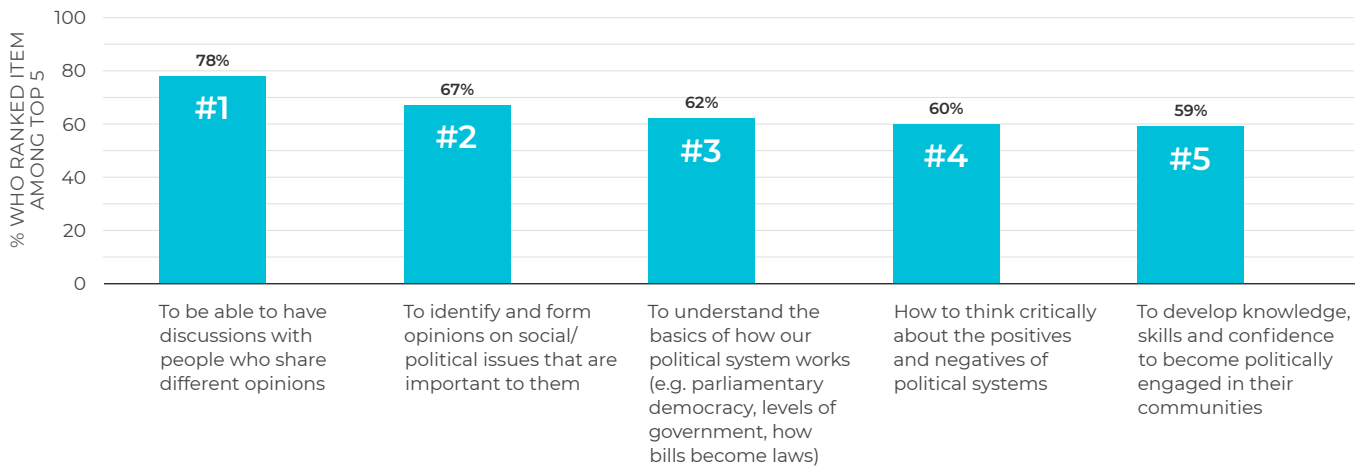
The first is that 56% of respondents selected teaching students “to learn to challenge the status quo and seek to remedy injustice” as among their personal priorities (ranked 6th overall). This item ranked dead last in terms of teacher perceptions of school

system priorities, selected by only 23% of teachers (13 percentage points less than the next lowest item).

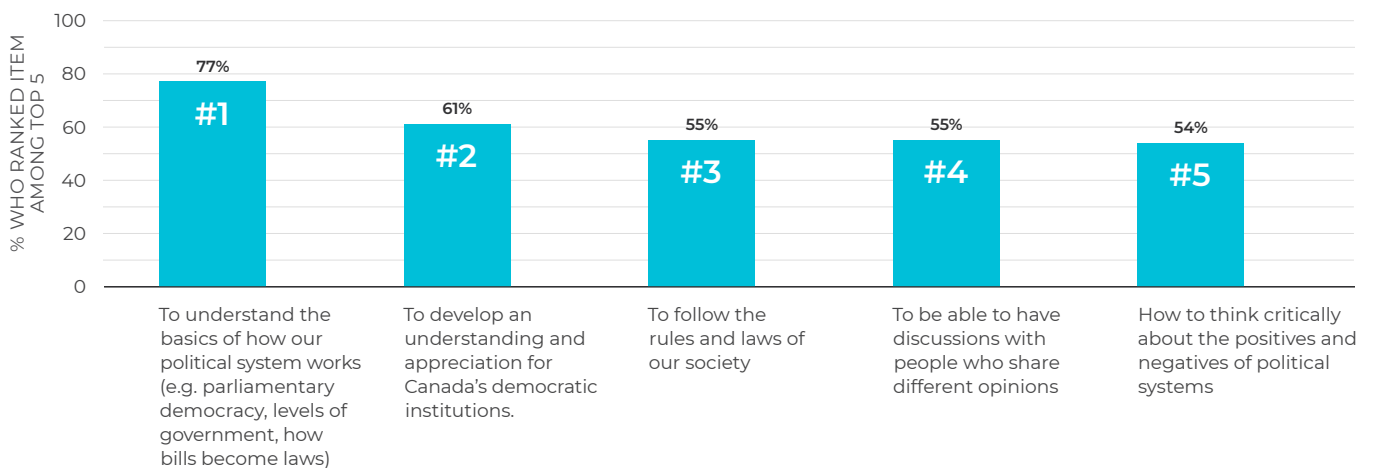
The second discrepancy is that teachers feel that the school system prioritizes “learning key dates and facts about our political history” much more than they do. Among teachers' priorities, it was by far the least selected option, with only 10% of teachers selecting it as one of their top priorities. In contrast, 35% of all respondents said it was among their school system’s top priorities.¹⁷

Top 5 Priorities

What do you think your school *should* prioritize teaching students?



What do you think your school *currently* prioritizes teaching students?

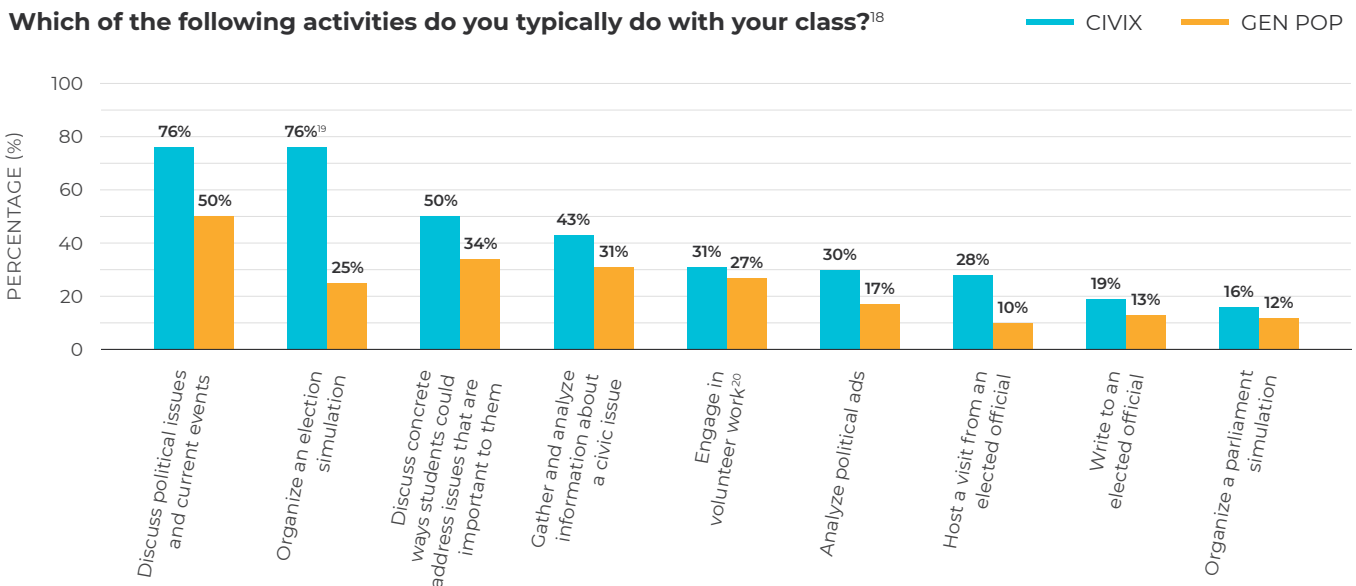


¹⁷ Notably, an emphasis on learning facts and dates was reported by far highest among Quebec respondents, with 55% saying that this was among the top priorities of their school system. High school teachers in general were also more likely than elementary teachers to list this as one of their school system’s top priorities.

Instructional Strategies

The form that civic education takes in the classroom matters. This may seem self-evident, but calls for “more” civic education often assume that the problem with civic education in Canada is one of quantity and not of quality and suggest that simply filling students’ heads with more political facts and knowledge will strengthen democracy. Civic education research has shown that the *quantity* of civics instruction alone has little effect on a student’s future civic engagement (Milner & Lewis, 2011; Willeck & Mendelberg, 2022). The method of instruction, however, does make a difference, and providing students with active civic learning opportunities can positively affect future political participation (Kahne & Spote, 2008; Willeck & Mendelberg, 2022).

A general consensus has emerged within civic education research that high-quality citizenship education needs to foreground inquiry-based and experiential learning that empowers students to engage deeply and critically with democratic values and processes and with authentic civic problems. This involves formal instruction in the nuts and bolts of how government and democracy work, but it also requires giving students opportunities to discuss difficult political issues, participate in authentic simulations of political processes, influence the culture of their schools, and apply what they are learning in their communities through meaningful service learning or civic action projects (Sears, 2014; Levine and Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2017; Campbell, 2019).

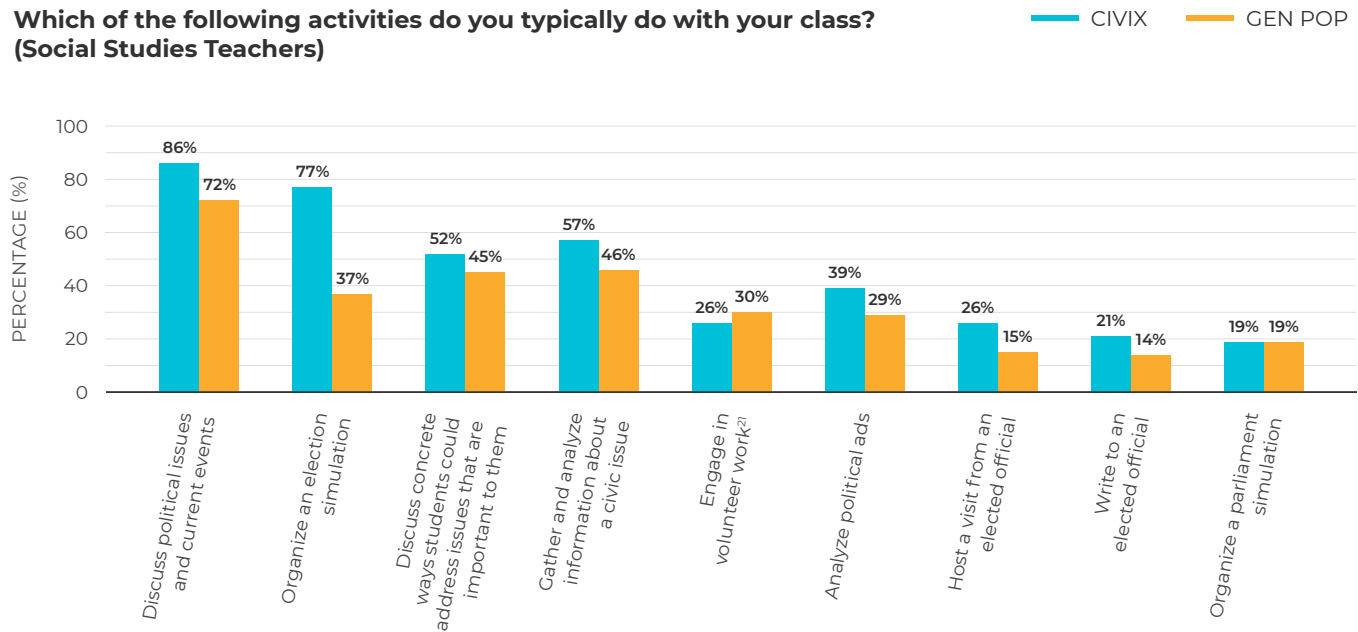


¹⁸ We have presented data from both populations here to offer a more holistic view of the types of activities teachers use in the classroom. Please note that the Gen Pop sample contains a larger proportion of non-social studies teachers, which likely accounts for some of the discrepancies between the two groups. Nonetheless, while some activities, like a parliament simulation, are much more suited for social studies classrooms, many of these activities could be cross-disciplinary. Gathering and analyzing data related to a civic issue, for example, is an activity as well suited for a math or science class as it is for social studies.

¹⁹ The very large discrepancy between the two populations is almost certainly due to the fact that CIVIX’s flagship program is the Student Vote parallel election program. The vast majority of educators in the CIVIX database would have participated in this program in the past.

²⁰ These numbers cannot account for the nature of the volunteering experience. As civic education researchers remind us, volunteering or service learning does not necessarily lead to positive civic outcomes. While this distinction is not accounted for here, meaningful volunteer opportunities are ones that ask students to reflect on the nature of volunteering, the social role of charities, and the systemic reasons volunteering is required in the first place. See, for example, Kahne and Westheimer (2006); Youniss (2012).

Which of the following activities do you typically do with your class? (Social Studies Teachers)



One experienced high school teacher from New Brunswick expanded on the importance of this approach to citizenship education:

"It's really important for [students] to be informed about who they are and what they stand for [and] that they can participate in a bigger community discussion about what is best for the country... And I think that the best way to understand that is to actually experience it. So simulations, scenarios, debates, those are wonderful ways to show that you don't just do this in your classroom, and that this is how you engage in citizenship in the broader community that you live in."

When we asked teachers to indicate which activities they typically do with their class, few teachers reported engaging their students in authentic, experiential activities aside from the discussion of current events and political issues.

This was true even when we looked only at teachers who identified as social studies teachers.²¹ These teachers report engaging in inquiry-based and experiential activities around civic issues more than the general population, but overall participation in these activities remains low.

These results are consistent with research that finds that Canadian educators, by and large, do not

prioritize the use of active learning or experiential activities in their classrooms (Bickmore 2014). Even as the evidence base supporting the efficacy of student-directed, inquiry-based and experiential learning in civic education has grown over the past two decades, in-class practices tend to remain largely unchanged. For a majority of students, civic learning still primarily focuses on, as Evans et al. (2020) put it, "knowing about and thinking about rather than engaging in." Indeed, this points to a major equity issue in civic education. All students are expected to develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of citizenship during their schooling, yet only a small minority are consistently given the tools and opportunities to best develop their capacity as civic actors.

To be clear, these numbers are much more likely a reflection of the major structural barriers teachers face (see below) than of teachers' commitment to implementing best practices. All of these activities take time and require a good deal of preparation as well as a baseline level of civic knowledge from both teachers and students. Even facilitating a discussion of a political issue, which may seem to be straightforward on the surface, involves a large amount of preparation on the part of teachers and students to do effectively.

²¹ This includes elementary teachers who said they teach "all subjects," since they are responsible for teaching social studies content.

Focus on Classroom Discussion

High quality discussion is a central component of citizenship education. The results of a longitudinal study of over 1 000 students conducted by Diana Hess and Paula McAvoy (2015) showed that consistent, structured, student-centred classroom discussions around political and controversial issues result in students who are more interested in current events, more engaged in class, more confident in discussing difficult topics, more able to listen to and negotiate competing viewpoints, and more likely to intend to vote.²²

Teachers were nearly unanimous in their belief in the importance of discussing controversial issues in class, with 93% of all teachers agreeing that “students need to study and discuss controversial issues to become engaged citizens” (55% were in strong agreement).

One experienced middle school teacher from Alberta expanded on the value of discussing difficult issues in a classroom setting:

“I feel like it’s a huge disservice to avoid controversial issues. If kids can’t learn at a young age how to have thoughtful conversations, respectful conversations, realizing you don’t have to agree with everything... I think those are important skills. And so if we don’t teach that, then when are they going to learn? I feel like [the classroom] is a safe place to test out some of those skills before they are in an adult situation where it’s less safe to try out those skills.”

Not all classroom discussions are equal, however. Hess and McAvoy found that many teachers conflated other forms of classroom talk, such as recitation or lecture with occasional questions, with discussion. Moreover, when discussion of political issues occurs in an ad hoc or unstructured manner, students may not achieve positive results, and the discussion may even be detrimental to student learning and the development of discussion skills.

Teachers in our survey prioritized classroom discussion above all other activities, and while the results cannot account for the quality of the discussions, they at least offer some insight into frequency. Hess and McAvoy (2015) define a “best practices discussion” classroom as one in which at least 20% of the class time involves students “talking seriously with one another about content.” At minimum, then, meeting this threshold would require teachers to spend at least one class period per week on discussion.

Students need to study and discuss controversial issues to become engaged citizens



Discussion of controversial or political issues is encouraged at my school



I worry about backlash from parents if I discuss political issues in class



²²This is just one of numerous studies which demonstrate the connection between classrooms that encourage frequent respectful discussion and positive civic outcomes. See, for example, Knowles et al. (2018); Westheimer (2019); Losito et al. (2021); McAvoy and Lowery (2022).



Sixty-eight percent of our survey respondents say that they discuss current events and issues in class at least once a week, with 19% of all respondents saying they do this daily.²³ High school teachers are even more likely to incorporate regular discussion in class: 80% say they discuss political issues and current events at least weekly, with 28% saying they do it daily.

Small group discussion was much less frequent. While high quality discussion does not necessarily only occur in small groups (just as small groups do not guarantee that a discussion is of a high quality), the small group structure does increase the chances that more students will have a chance to share their points of view and engage deeply in the conversation.

Only 49% of survey respondents said their students discuss issues in small groups at least once a week, with 15% of all respondents saying their students do this multiple times per week. There was no significant difference in frequency between high school and elementary teachers.

Despite classroom discussion being by far the most selected classroom activity, even in the best case scenario where these discussions meet the threshold of a high quality discussion, less than half of Canadian students are engaging in this important civic practice.

A variety of external factors may also contribute to students not engaging in frequent, high-quality discussion around civic issues. Discussing political issues in the classroom can be a challenging and high-risk activity for teachers, especially if they don't feel like they have the support of their school administration or the broader school community. Of teachers we surveyed, only 55% agreed that their school encourages them to discuss political issues in class, with only 11% in strong agreement. Even more notably, teachers reported concerns around potential reactions from parents who may object to their children discussing some political topics. Sixty percent of teachers agreed that they worry about backlash from parents if they discuss political issues in class, with 18% in strong agreement.

²³It is very likely that these numbers provide an inflated picture of classroom discussion in Canadian classrooms, as they cannot account for the quality or duration of individual discussions.

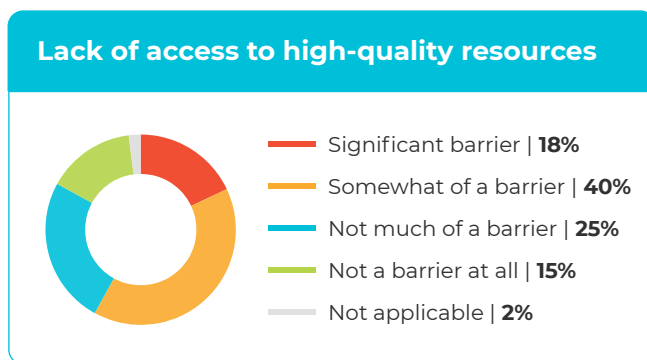
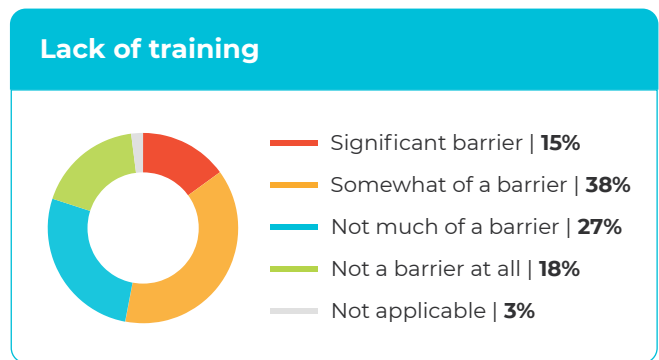
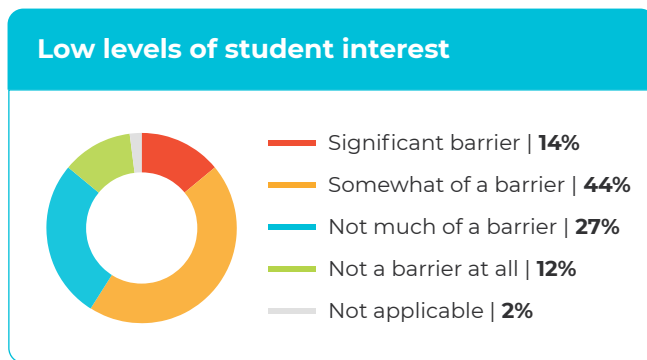
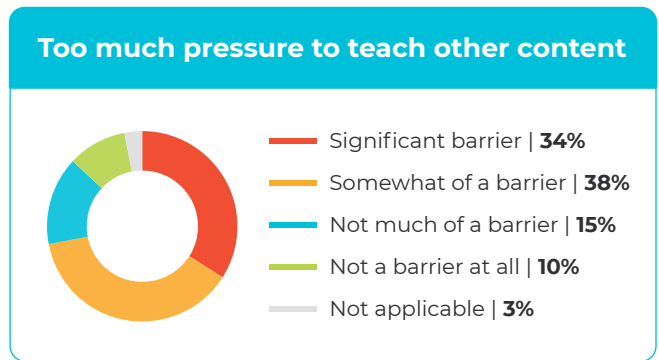
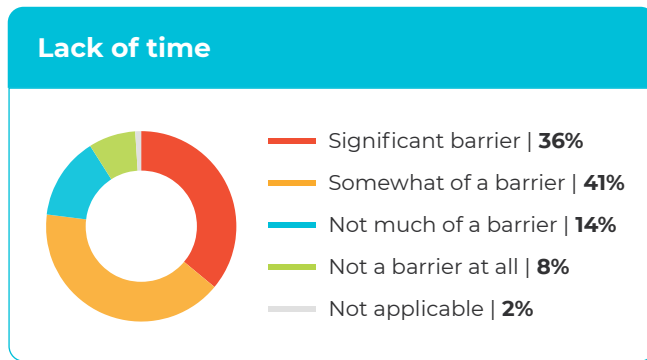
Barriers to Teaching Civics

Top Barriers to Teaching Civics

A mismatch of priorities is just one of many barriers Canadians civics teachers face. When teachers were asked which barriers interfere with their ability to teach civics, over 70% of teachers indicated a lack of time and too much pressure to teach other content as barriers to doing their job as best they can. Over a third of respondents considered these to be “significant” barriers.

Secondary barriers include perceived low levels of student interest in the topic, a lack of training, and a lack of access to high-quality resources. Each of these was identified as at least “somewhat of a barrier” by more than half of respondents.

The Top 5 Barriers



Lack of Training a Major Issue

It is worth highlighting that a lack of training emerged as a central issue of concern throughout the survey. Notably, only a quarter of teachers agreed that they received any formal pre-service training in civic education, and nearly half (48%) of teachers strongly disagreed that they received training at the pre-service level. New teachers were just as likely to say that they did not receive formal pre-service training as more experienced teachers who did their pre-serve training two decades ago.

Despite the increased burden placed upon citizenship education in curriculum documents, there is little infrastructure to ensure that Canadian teachers are prepared to be good civic educators. Echoing the concerns around citizenship education at the K-12 levels, Hughes and Sears (2008) describe pre-service and in-service training around civic education to be “sporadic, episodic and dependent upon individual initiative rather than system-wide commitments.”

Provinces and territories lack a commitment to pre-service training in citizenship, and faculties of education are inconsistent at offering even elective courses related to politics or citizenship. As such, there is no guarantee that pre-service teachers, even those specializing in social studies, will be asked to think deeply and critically about questions of citizenship or be exposed to effective student-centered methods of teaching civics before being expected to teach the complex concepts of citizenship to their students (Hughes et al., 2010; Straub and Maynes, 2021).

An experienced civic educator who also teaches pre-service elementary teachers noted how many of her teacher candidates come to her class lacking civic knowledge and described how she uses her class to get them comfortable with the basics:

“I would say, a clear 95% of [teacher candidates] are pretty disengaged. And this is not a criticism [of them]; it’s just a product of our system of education [where]...sometimes the civics piece gets lost. So I help the teachers understand that it’s totally okay, if that’s where you are. And [we talk about things like] what’s the difference between my MLA/MPP and my MP? And what does MP stand for? And how do those seats work? So how do ridings work?... And how does a bill become a law in Canada?”

What this teacher’s pre-service students learn in her class is likely the only formal training in citizenship education they will receive, yet even that small amount puts them ahead of many teacher candidates in Canada.

My pre-service education included formal training in civics



Sometimes, teachers assigned to teach civics don't want the course or are unqualified to teach it



“I haven’t had any PD on civics in my 17 years of teaching. It’s been ... non-existent”

—ONTARIO HIGH SCHOOL TEACHER

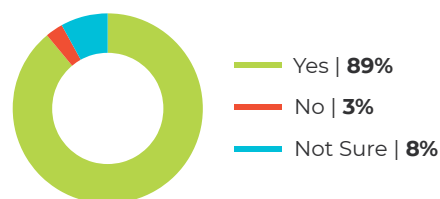
The lack of specific training around civics continues after teachers enter the classroom. Less than half (49%) of surveyed teachers agreed that they receive adequate in-service training to teach civics, with only 13% strongly agreeing.

With formal training in civics inconsistent at best and absent at worst, it is not surprising that the motivation and qualification of teachers to teach civics was a major concern among survey respondents. Nearly three quarters (72%) of respondents agreed that “sometimes, teachers assigned to teach civics don’t want the course or are unqualified to teach it,” with nearly a quarter of respondents (24%) stating they agreed strongly. The percentage of teachers who agreed with this statement was highest in Nova Scotia (88%) and Ontario (77%), the only two provinces at the time of survey with mandatory standalone civics courses at the secondary level.

Despite the lack of training, 68% of teachers at least “somewhat” agreed that they are up to date on research and best practices in civic education, though only 18% strongly agreed. Agreement with this prompt was

also significantly higher among teachers with at least six years of teaching experience. Newer teachers, who ideally would be exposed to newest research and best practices during their teacher education program, felt least up to date, with only 53% in agreement. Moreover, 89% of all teachers expressed interest in resources that would keep them informed on current research in the field, suggesting the need for more open and accessible channels connecting academic research with practice.

Would you be interested in resources that would keep you up to date on research and best practices in civic education



Civics and Students

Student Interest in Civics

Finally, we asked teachers about their students' relationship to civic education. The results only represent teacher perceptions of students and may not necessarily reflect how students actually feel, but they nonetheless offer insight into how students relate to civic education in its current state.

Overall, teachers seem to believe that the issue of student apathy is a problem but one that perhaps isn't as dire as some popular narratives suggest. Sixty-eight percent of teachers agree that their students are interested in learning about politics, though only 11% agreed strongly. When asked if their students understand how politics are relevant to their lives, 62% agreed, though only 8% agreed strongly.

When we framed the question in terms of "social issues," however, teachers responded much more optimistically: 92% agreed that their students are interested in discussing social issues, with 39% agreeing strongly.

In focus groups, teachers further complicated the idea that students are generally politically apathetic. They confirmed that many students are invested in political issues and that many of them seem more socially aware than before due to social media:

"I feel this generation is far more aware than my past generation, and that's because of resources such as Instagram and TikTok."

— HIGH SCHOOL TEACHER

Teachers acknowledged that students are often unable to relate to politicians or feel that political leaders are ignoring the problems that matter to them most, but above all, they were clear that the major challenge for teachers is getting students to connect the issues they care about to formal political and governmental structures.

My students are interested in learning about politics and government



My students are interested discussing social issues



"When kids know it's about them, or they have some attachment to it, then I feel like they are more interested in it, so [the goal is] really trying to find things that are going to strike a chord with them."

— HIGH SCHOOL TEACHER

According to focus group participants, making these connections should not be the burden of the students but of the teacher. A number of teachers mentioned that a lack of student connection to the material can be teacher-driven if the teacher isn't knowledgeable or passionate about the subject. One high school educator mentioned how teacher initiative is especially important since resources given to them by schools don't address the current issues that students care about.

"I haven't used textbooks in my four years of teaching just because a lot of them are still there from when I was in high school...There's a lot of onus on the teachers to bring forth [engaging] resources themselves, and the only way that's going to work or be useful is if you have [teachers] who care about what their bringing forth, and know what to look for."

In our discussions with experienced civic educators, one elementary teacher elaborated on the importance of helping students make connections between the problems that affect them and their families to formal politics:

"When you make that connection, it's literally a sound, you hear them go [gasps]. And they make that connection. Oh, that's about the sidewalk. That's about the road that every time we drive over it, it takes out mom's tire. That's about the fact that Papa was so sick, and he couldn't get an operation for months and months and months. As soon as you make those connections, all of a sudden, this stuff matters...As soon as a student can make connections to the real world, all of a sudden, it becomes a really powerful thing because then maybe a phone call can be made or an email can be sent or an invitation can be made to speak to someone who can help them make a difference in some of those issues."

A high school teacher from Manitoba echoed the importance of helping students connect their lived experiences to policy before explaining the specifics of civic processes in order to help make the process knowledge more immediately relevant to students:

"First of all, I try to help my students to understand the significance of the daily impact of public policy and [of] living in a democracy. And then I go about trying to help them to acquire the knowledge that they need in order to understand government processes, and the responsibilities of citizenship. And then we start to look at engagement, and [ask] 'what does engagement look like [in relation to these issues]?"

Ontario high school teachers also noted a further challenge, stating that the standalone Civics and Citizenship course actually impedes student interest in the topic because its positioning within the curriculum as a half-credit course results in students perceiving it as irrelevant. According to focus group participants, students end up seeing the course as "just a credit" or a "dead-end course [that provides] no motivation to want to do well and get immersed in it because... there's no pathway that goes beyond grade 10 in Ontario."²⁴

²⁴The Ontario curriculum does contain two advanced courses explicitly related to politics and citizenship: Politics in Action: Making Change (Grade 11) and Canadian and International Politics (Grade 12). Both of these courses are electives and are not offered in all schools.

To help students build connections to their daily lives, focus group teachers recommended activities that allow students to experience how the government affects their lives, that connect students with their elected officials, and that take advantage of real-life political events, like elections. They also suggested giving students voice and agency by allowing them to choose which issues to study and discuss.

Implicit in many comments was the importance of nurturing a democratic classroom environment where students take ownership over portions of their learning and where they are expected to practice some of the skills and habits of democratic citizenship. Often, we think of school in terms of its undemocratic nature — a space where students are a captive audience compelled to learn a set curriculum. But, as these teachers note, it's very important for the classroom or the school to be a space where students are able to experience and engage with democratic values in an authentic way, where they are able to see themselves as part of a shared pluralistic community, and where they can learn how to contribute to meaningful change using nonviolent means. They frame the classroom, in other words, as not simply a space where citizenship is “taught” but one where it is practiced.²⁵

One experienced civic educator from Manitoba described how he uses democratic pedagogy to engage his high school students:

“I believe that democratic citizenship is based on how you do pedagogy in the classroom. If students believe that they're part of the decision-making process — if they're not just sitting in chairs [with] someone hovering over top of them — this sets the stage [for] this idea of what [they will] do later on in society.”

This teacher clarified that he does not mean that students should have free reign over all classroom decisions, but that allowing them to make meaningful, and sometimes difficult, choices in class empowers them to engage with democratic values in an authentic way.

²⁵See Sears et al. (2014) and Collins et al. (2019) for extended discussions of how schools can better encourage student voice and democratic participation.



Another focus group teacher perhaps best summarized this approach to making civic education more relevant to students in her framing of citizenship as not just a subject for students to learn but as a lens through which they can understand and navigate the world:

“I would say for me, civic education is essentially the foundation of establishing a classroom community. And that is something that is ongoing and that is a touchstone of how we begin [each class]... Every single day, we're taking on that democratic approach.”

Recommendations to Support Citizenship Education

If citizenship education in Canada is ever to meet the ambitions laid out in curriculum documents, education stakeholders at all levels must commit to prioritizing civic education in concrete and actionable ways. The following recommendations represent necessary, but not necessarily sufficient, changes that can strengthen citizenship education.



The first four recommendations reflect large-scale structural changes. These changes cannot be addressed by individual teachers or schools and require the attention of government and school administration as well as support from funding bodies and educational NGOs.

PROVIDE EXPLICIT SUPPORT FOR ACHIEVING CURRICULAR AND CROSS-CURRICULAR OUTCOMES

Curriculum documents in Canada tend to outline admirable expectations for citizenship education, but they offer little guidance for teachers on how to best meet the stated outcomes. Based on our survey results, teachers seem to feel especially unsupported when it comes to integrating citizenship across the curriculum. Frameworks and descriptions of competencies are useful high-level documents that provide flexibility and allow teachers to keep the big picture in mind, but they require practical supports for educators to make the most of them. As such, curriculum documents and guides need to provide teachers with concrete instructional strategies and tangible examples for achieving the required outcomes.

SUPPORT CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION RESEARCH

In order to meet the demands of school curricula, Canada needs sustained investment in citizenship education research. This requires gathering baseline data on student civic learning beyond knowledge acquisition. It also requires developing Canada's research base on how students best learn the skills of citizenship.

²⁶For more on the importance of high-quality pre-service education in citizenship, see Kennedy (2005), Pashby and Engel (2020), and Westheimer (2022).

INVEST IN TRAINING AT ALL LEVELS

In order to achieve the mandate laid out in curriculum documents, educators need to be provided with consistent training in citizenship education. They need to be given formal opportunities to develop their own civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions and develop a deep understanding of citizenship that they can work towards through their teaching.

Faculties of education across the country must ensure that teacher candidates who will be expected to teach politics graduate with a knowledge of both subject content as well as evidence-based teaching strategies. Teacher candidates who are not generalists or social studies specialists should also be trained in strategies for teaching their subjects through a citizenship lens, including how to facilitate high-quality discussions around civic issues related to their subject matter.²⁶

Ministries and Departments of Education, teachers' associations, and school boards must also place greater value on professional learning and offer teachers frequent opportunities to acquire and refine the knowledge and skills required to deliver effective citizenship education. These opportunities could range from content-driven in-service training for teachers teaching politics and government for the first time to more generalized professional development to equip teachers with strategies for integrating citizenship across the curriculum. In all cases, adequate time must be made for professional development opportunities and they must be structured to maximize the chances that teachers are able to incorporate what they've learned into their classrooms. Professional development held in advance of the school year and accompanied by dedicated time for teachers to implement any insights into their lesson plans, for example, will likely produce better results than evening webinars, or single or partial-day sessions held in the middle of the school year when teachers are too busy to participate or integrate any new material into the classroom.

BUILD INFRASTRUCTURE TO SUPPORT A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE AMONG CITIZENSHIP EDUCATORS THROUGH WHICH RESEARCH, BEST PRACTICES, AND RESOURCES CAN BE SHARED

Educators want to stay up to date with current research and best practices in citizenship education but, for many teachers, this research is inaccessible. It is often paywalled, and even if it was freely available, teachers simply do not have the time to comb through, synthesize, and operationalize emerging research on citizenship education. Infrastructure needs to be built that can curate emerging research and support teachers in connecting research and practice in concrete, actionable ways.

Civic educators also require infrastructure that allows them to connect with each other to share ideas and best practices. Educators invested in citizenship education often do not have colleagues with similar interests at their schools and would benefit from being part of a broader community of practice.

The second set of recommendations reflect changes that can be made at the school or even classroom level to support citizenship education. That said, successful implementation at scale still requires broader institutional support at the board/district and government levels.

PRIORITIZE AUTHENTIC, EXPERIENTIAL, AND PROJECT-BASED LEARNING

Citizenship education needs to foreground inquiry-based and experiential learning that empowers students to engage with real-world issues in authentic ways. Political simulations, role-playing activities, conversations with elected officials, and community based civic projects are just some activities that can deepen students' civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions. Importantly, students do not need deep formal knowledge of politics and government *before* engaging with authentic civic questions and problems. Instead, students can develop formal process knowledge through studying issues that are meaningful to them.²⁷

INTEGRATE CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION ACROSS THE CURRICULUM AND ACROSS LEVELS

Across Canada, citizenship is widely identified as a cross-curricular competency, but the teachers we surveyed do not feel that cross-curricular integration is being achieved. While explicit instruction in formal government processes may be best suited for social studies, every discipline can engage deeply and regularly with authentic questions of civic importance. This does not require a full-scale curricular restructuring, nor does it imply that, for example, the high school math teacher should be required to spend a week teaching students how bills become laws. Rather, it requires teachers in all disciplines to teach their subjects through a citizenship lens. A class studying statistics, for instance, could survey students in their school about issues of concern and develop data-driven recommendations to benefit the school community, or students in a technology class could engage in deep discussions about how governments should or should not regulate AI.

SUPPORT CLASSROOM DISCUSSION OF CIVIC ISSUES

Classroom discussion about civic issues is central to citizenship education. Students who engage in frequent student-centred discussions of political or controversial issues are more interested in current events, more engaged in class, more confident in discussing difficult topics, more able to listen to and negotiate competing viewpoints, and more likely to intend to vote.

For some teachers, discussing political issues in class can feel like a high-risk activity, so educators need to be supported in bringing high-quality discussion into their classrooms. This involves not only ensuring that teachers have access to relevant training, resources, and content to help build confidence and capacity, but it also requires teachers to have the full support of their administration and their school boards.

PROMOTE DEMOCRATIC CULTURE AND VALUES IN SCHOOLS AND CLASSROOMS

Schools and classrooms are often not oriented toward democracy even as they purport to 'teach' citizenship. School should be a space where students come to see themselves as part of a community and where they are given opportunities to engage with and practice democratic values. This can take many forms, co-creating classroom norms and engaging in meaningful group decision making related to their learning to participating in more formal mechanisms like student government or advisory councils that engage with issues relevant to the school community.

²⁷See Llewellyn and Westheimer (2009) for a discussion of how educators can use students' pre-existing civic knowledge and lived experience — what they call "civic assets" — to spur political engagement.

Conclusion

While much needs to be done to better support high-quality citizenship education in the classroom, we must also acknowledge the limitations of the education system.

Although teachers are on the frontlines of democracy and are perhaps democracy's greatest line of defense, they cannot and should not take on the whole burden of developing the competencies of citizenship among youth. Canada's civic health is not determined solely by what does or does not happen in schools. The home and the community are also major sites of civic education, and the work of the classroom can be amplified or undone in these settings. Moreover, if we want young people

to take an interest in their communities and their country, then people in positions of power must demonstrate that they are accountable to their youngest constituents. Regardless of what happens in the classroom or what methods teachers use, if students see and experience our political systems as unresponsive and unaccountable, then civics won't feel like education or empowerment; it will feel like propaganda.



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