# Promoting Civic Engagement Through Afterschool Programs

Americans have a strong conviction for the ideal of democracy. According to a bipartisan report commissioned by the George W. Bush Institute, the Penn Biden Center for Diplomacy and Global Engagement, and the Freedom House, 5 in 6 Americans believe that it is "important to live in a democracy."[1] However, the data linked to indicators of a healthy democracy paint a different picture. For example, the U.S. ranks 26th in voter turnout among the 36 democracies that make up the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD),[2] and only 1 in 4 Americans is able to name all three branches of government.[3] Civic engagement starts with our nation's young people, since engagement in adolescence increases the likelihood of engagement in adulthood. As 3 in 4 superintendents agree that preparing students for engaged citizenship is a challenge for their district,[4] it is important to recognize that afterschool and summer learning programs are critical partners in the work toward creating an informed public that has knowledge of democratic institutions and processes and opportunities to apply lessons learned. Afterschool programs strengthen student civic engagement by providing students with valuable hands-on experiences that help them become informed, involved, and conscientious individuals.

Not making the grade

The United States faces a civic engagement predicament, particularly with the nation's young people. The country is falling short in places like at the polls and in the community, where youth can exercise their right to be heard, and in spaces like the classroom, where students should be learning the goals and structures of democracy to become engaged and informed.

Figure 1

Voting rates by age: 1980–2016

65 and older

45-to-64-year-olds

30-to-44-year-olds

18-to-29-year-olds
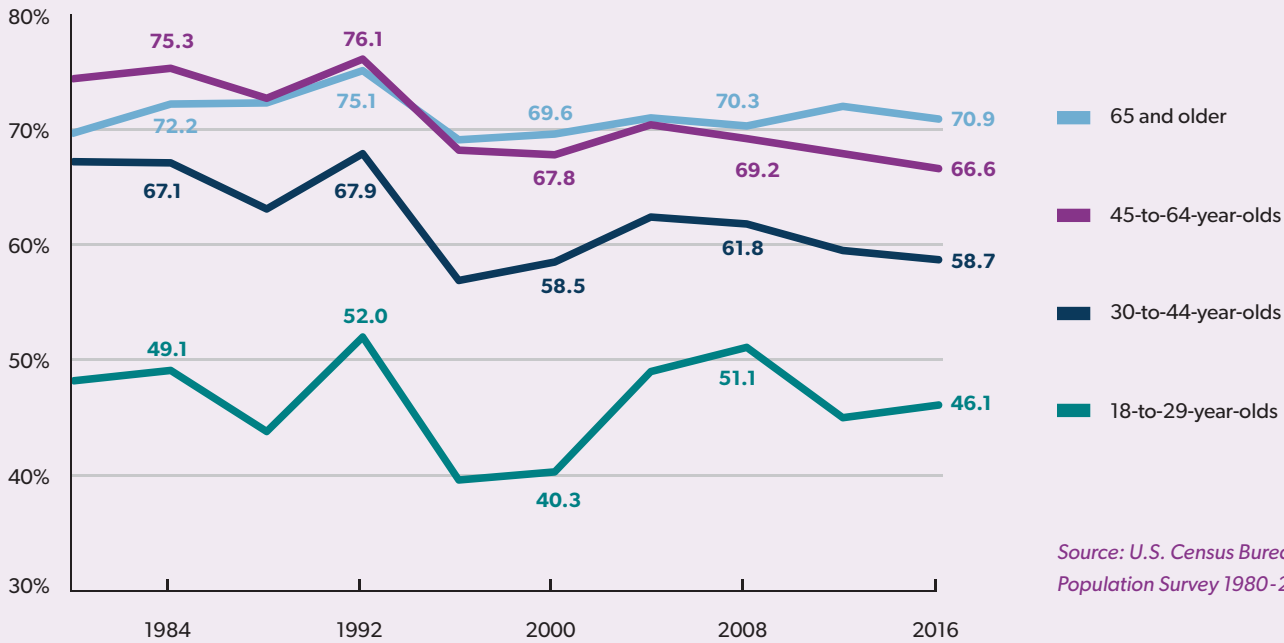
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey 1980-2016.

A disengaged public

In recent years, young people have not demonstrated particularly high levels of engagement in activities that indicate a civic disposition or a drive to effect positive change at both local and national levels. Between 1980 and 2016, the percentage of 18-to-24-year-old voters fell well below voting rates of older aged cohorts; with the exception of the 1992, 2008, and 2016 elections, fewer than half of this age group turned out to the polls during presidential elections (*See Figure 1*).[5]

Volunteerism rates are also low among young people.[6] In 2015, only 1 in 4 people over the age of 16 reported volunteering at least once during the year. Among 16-to-24-year-olds specifically, volunteerism is even lower and consistently remains below the national average.[7]

Civics in schools is largely a second-tier subject

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act ushered in a greater emphasis on test-based accountability, with a particular focus on reading and math. This left less time for subjects like civics and social studies, despite continued poor student performance in these areas.[8] Approximately 3 in 10 eighth-grade students performed below basic on the 1998, 2006, 2010, and 2014 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) civics assessment.[9] A Center on Education Policy report found that four years after the passage of NCLB, 71 percent of school districts reduced time in at least one subject, including history, civics, science, and art and music, to make more time for reading and math.[10]

While civics education requirements and policies vary by state, a 2018 analysis by the Center for American Progress found that there is not currently a "sufficient and comprehensive civic education" provided by any state.[11] Reinforcing this point, although all 50 states had a state standard or curriculum that mentioned discussion of current events, and 42 states had at least one civics-related high school graduation course requirement,* a 2018 scan of civics education by the Brown Center on Education Policy at Brookings reflected that components of a high-quality civics education, such as interactive and participatory opportunities for learning, were largely missing (*See sidebar: Civics education best practices)*.[12] Only 11 states mention service learning in their state standards or curriculum, and only 26 mention simulations of democratic processes or procedures.[13] In the 2010 and 2014 NAEP civics assessments, more than half of twelfth-graders reported that they never participated in role playing, mock trials, or drama at school.[14]

Civic engagement as an equity issue

Civic engagement affords political capital, empowering individuals to be active and vocal participants in issues affecting their neighborhoods, their states, and their country. Yet, disparities are present across income levels and race and ethnicity when looking at voter turnout and volunteerism. A Pew Research Center report analyzing "nonvoters," individuals who are not registered to vote or unlikely to vote in an upcoming election, found that compared to likely voters, nonvoters are more racially and ethnically diverse and less well off. For example, 46 percent of nonvoters have a family income of less than $30,000, whereas only 19 percent of likely voters' family income is below $30,000.[15] Similarly, in a separate Pew Research Center study, 64 percent of parents with a household income greater than $75,000 said that their child had volunteered in the past year, 27 percentage points higher than parents with a household income below $30,000.[16] White parents were also more likely to report that their children had volunteered (57 percent) than African American and Latino parents (43 percent and 45 percent, respectively).

Of note are the disparities that surface when examining circumstances hindering civic participation. Youth of color were more likely than their white peers to cite trouble locating a polling place, finding transportation to a polling place, and encountering problems with voter identification as factors that prevented them from voting in the 2016 election.[17] Differences in educational opportunities that build civic dispositions have also been documented. In a working paper by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), students in classes with a high average socioeconomic status level were more likely to report learning how laws are made, participating in service activities, and taking part in debates or panel discussions.[18]

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*This included "civics, U.S. history, government, law, democracy, economics, geography, or a combination course that incorporated one or more of these subjects."

Civic engagement and global competence

The partnership between the Afterschool Alliance and the Center for Global Education at Asia Society is fitting considering Asia Society's work on global competence. Its definition of global competence is "the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to understand and act creatively on issues of global significance," with the following recommended four domains of focus to organize educators' instructional practices and help students:

- Investigate the world
- Recognize perspectives
- Communicate ideas
- Take action

From facilitating interest in better understanding how the world works to taking action to make a difference in the world, the complementary nature of civic engagement and global competence is evident.

To learn more, visit the Center for Global Education's "What is Global Competence" web page.

Afterschool is putting civic engagement into action

Involvement in civic engagement has been linked to positive short-term outcomes, including improvements in academics and behavior, connection to the community, and overall wellbeing.[19] In the long term, youth who are civically engaged are more likely to remain civically engaged as adults, are less likely to be arrested, and are found to have higher educational attainment, income level, and satisfaction with their lives.[20]

The afterschool field is an essential partner in ensuring that all children have the ability to participate in immersive, relevant, and hands-on civic engagement opportunities. Afterschool programs reach into underserved communities—African American and Latino children participate at higher rates in afterschool programs than white children, and rates of afterschool program participation in communities of concentrated poverty are higher than the national average.[21] Programs also reinforce understanding of democratic principles and develop civic dispositions. The adaptable nature of afterschool allows students to pursue projects related to their interests and passions, oftentimes connecting students to issues impacting their community. A study of students involved in afterschool programming with civics and leadership components found that students developed agency, organizational skills, responsibility, persistence, strategic thinking, and the ability to apply these skills to other areas of their lives.[22] Students participating in afterschool programs' service-learning components saw improvements in their grade point averages and were less likely to be suspended than students not participating in the service-learning components.[23]

An overwhelming consensus from groups in the field of civic engagement, including the Brown Center on Education Policy at Brookings, Leonore Annenberg Institute for Civics at the University of Pennsylvania, and the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, recommends encouraging and fostering youth civic engagement through community involvement; leadership, advocacy, governance, and democracy knowledge-building opportunities; and extracurricular activities. Additionally, opportunities created by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which includes support

Civics education best practices

The 2018 Brown Center Report on American Education describes 10 proven practices for a high-quality civics education based on education guidebooks and toolkits by the Education Commission of the States, the Council of State Governments, the National Center for Learning and Civic Engagement, and the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools:

1. Classroom instruction in civics, government, history, law, economics, and geography

2. Discussion of current events

3. Service learning

4. Extracurricular activities

5. Student participation in school governance

6. Simulations of democratic processes and procedures

7. News media literacy

8. Action civics

9. Social-emotional learning

10. School climate reform

The 2018 Brown Center Report on American Education: How Well are American Students Learning?

for states to expand civic engagement efforts and school-community partnerships, establish new avenues for strengthening civic engagement where the afterschool field can participate as partners. From coast to coast, afterschool and summer learning programs are embedding recommended and proven practices (*See sidebar: Civics education best practices*) to inspire youth to be knowledgeable, engaged, and civically minded individuals.

Helping students know their rights and responsibilities

In order to fully participate in a democracy, individuals must be aware of what participation entails and understand the means by which they can engage. Afterschool and summer learning programs foster a supportive environment that lifts up youth identity and empowers students to see themselves as active change agents. Helping youth know their rights and responsibilities includes increasing their knowledge about history and democratic structures, making them aware of their legal and civil rights, and providing lessons that develop their civic dispositions and demonstrate ways to advance change. At **Alternatives, Inc.**, Hampton, Va., elementary and middle schoolers identify a community need they want to address and develop action plans to address that issue. Alternatives, Inc.'s K.I.C.K. program (Kids Involved in Community Kindness) reinforces the message that everyone, regardless of age, can make a difference and emphasizes the importance of community by taking an intentional approach that walks students through the process of effecting change. Students in the program have addressed issues such as the safety of their playground and cleanup efforts in their neighborhood. Through the program, students increase their sense of personal and civic responsibility. Young people in the program have stated that they are proud of what they have accomplished and believe in their ability to make a difference in their school, neighborhood, and the world.

Youth engaged in social justice work feel a sense of belonging in their programs.[24] High schoolers in **Equity Alliance MN's** Youth Executive Board (YEB) reflect on and discuss topics such as implicit bias, privilege, oppression, and the history of the civil rights movement to better understand and recognize the effects of systems and structures on their lives and learn how to influence policy and practice. Lessons are scaffolded: they begin with time for self-reflection and team-building exercises and work up to developing students' self-efficacy, agency, and leadership skills. Student initiatives have included establishing an equity team at their high school, speaking to their school dean about proposed changes to the school's discipline policies, and publishing children's books that positively represent women and people of color after reflecting that these representations were missing from their own children's books growing up.

Offering opportunities for students to take action

The afterschool field provides students hands-on and interactive opportunities that take lessons from the classroom into the real world, equipping young people with the tools to take action and inspire change. Life Service Action is **After-School All-Stars Hawaii's** (ASASHI) student-led service-learning initiative where middle schoolers discuss community issues and design projects to address those issues. Students in the program have tackled issues including poverty, bullying, and
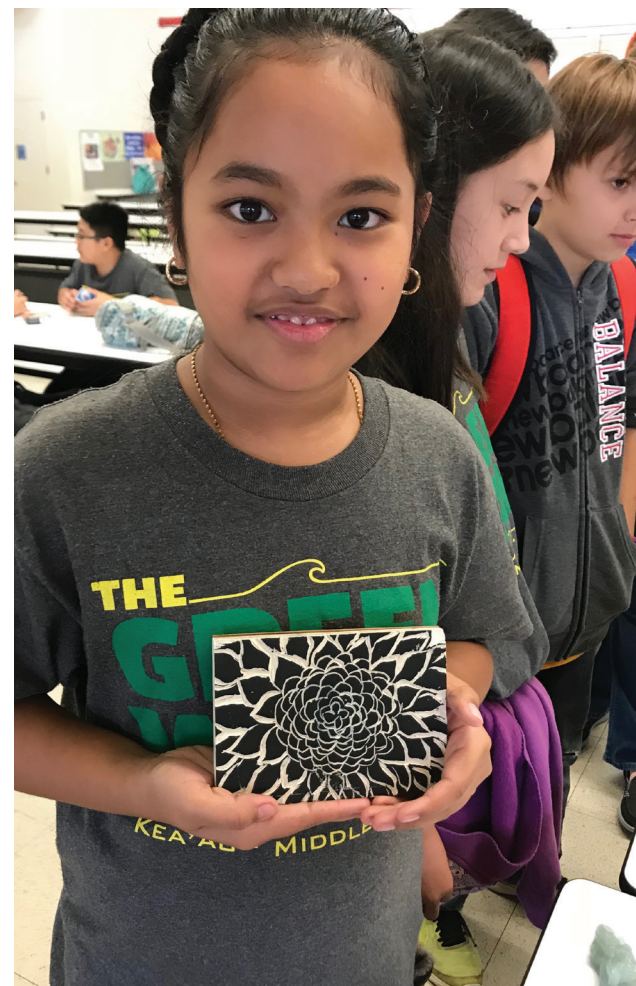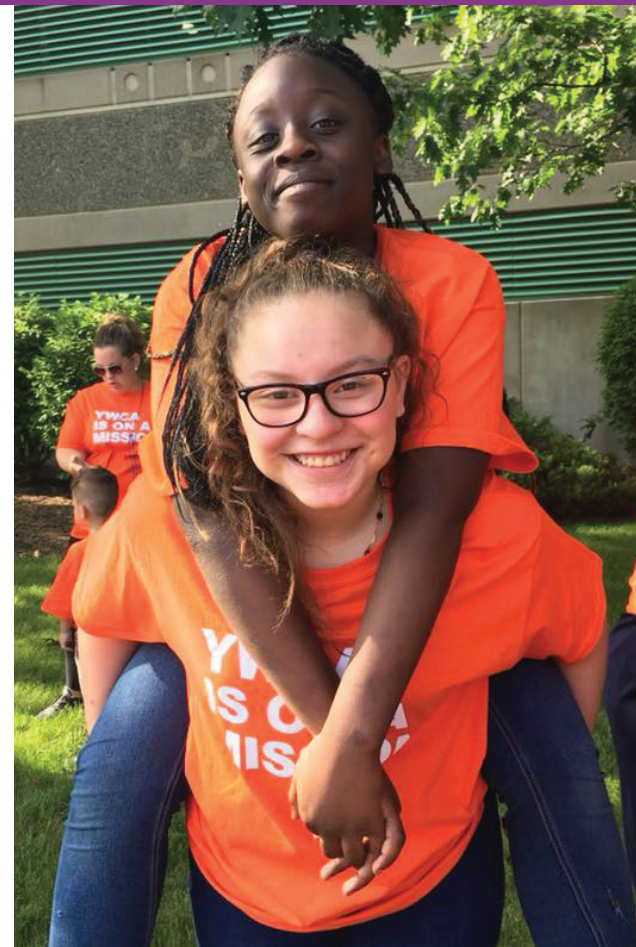
health and fitness. The program first began as a series of community service field trips and developed into a broader, year-long, themed service project. In a 2015-2016 national survey, 89 percent of Life Service Action participants said that they are more confident in their ability to make a difference in their community, and 74 percent now volunteer because of After-School All-Stars.

Providing authentic opportunities for students to lead and govern

Programs that are able to give students a role in shaping the program and activities and allow them to lead projects increase students' buy-in to the programs and ownership of their projects.[25] **YWCA New Britain** House of Teens program, in Conn., engages high school girls in activities intended to equip them with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to address barriers to health in their neighborhoods, speak out to generate change, and lead healthy lives. Through the program Photovoice, girls use digital cameras to explore their neighborhoods and capture barriers to health, such as the lack of child-friendly public spaces, and collectively reflect on, identify, and develop solutions to the issues of concern. Girls in the program have shared their recommendations and advocated for policy change to audiences that included the city mayor, school administrators, the police department, and Connecticut's Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities. One photo project capturing closed local swimming pools and parks with litter and graffiti led to beautification efforts that included the installation of new splash pads and turf. Teens can also join the program's advisory board and participate in the organization's decision-making process on upcoming events and projects.

In rural Wash., middle and high school students in **YMCA of Port Angeles'** Youth and Government program learn about democracy through a wholly immersive experience. Beginning with discussions of how to be an informed voter and a smart consumer of information, students move on to debating current issues of their choice, learning how public policy impacts their daily life, and drafting legislative policies. The program culminates in a four-day event at the state capitol, where students in YMCA Youth and Government programs across the state take over both chambers to introduce, debate, and vote on legislation as they move through the legislative process. Students fill all roles in the process, including pages, clerks, reporters, lobbyists, legislators, attorney general, and governor. Bills signed by the student governor are shared with Washington state's legislature to consider. One bill passed by the YMCA Youth and Government program establishing that a white line be painted along the curbside of two-lane roads in the state was later introduced and passed by the Washington State Legislature and signed into law.

Conclusion

Educating and engaging students today is central to preserving and strengthening the country's democracy in the future. It is a collective responsibility to promote the goals of democracy; this obligation extends beyond the last school bell. Recent developments, such as the passage and current implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which includes civics as a component of a well-rounded education and supports school-community partnerships, can facilitate collaborative efforts. Cross-sector efforts should involve the afterschool field, as these programs promote students' civic dispositions, bring lessons of democracy to life, and empower youth to enact change.
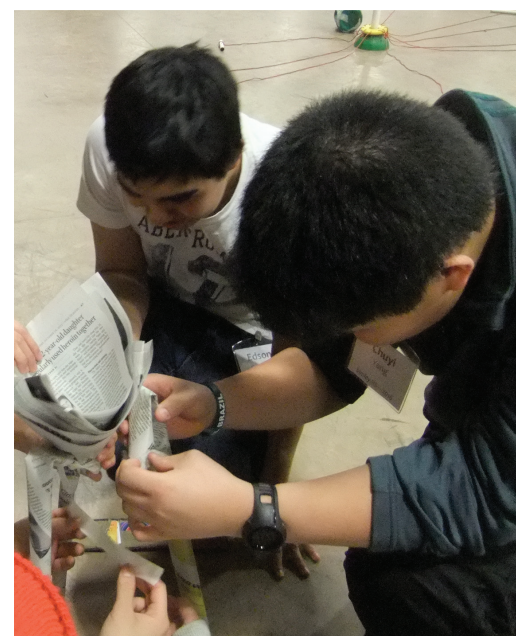
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