

2018-19

GENERATION CITIZEN POLICY AND ADVOCACY AGENDA



ABOUT OUR POLICY AND ADVOCACY AGENDA

Generation Citizen works to ensure that every student in the United States receives an effective Action Civics education, which provides them with the knowledge and skills necessary to participate in our democracy as active citizens. To that end, we promote policies that holistically promote Action Civics across the country.

Generation Citizen's (GC) policy and advocacy agenda describes our approach to prioritizing Action Civics in federal, state, and district-level policies, laws, education standards, and programming. Our agenda is not intended to serve as a definitive statement to be applied in all communities. Instead, the agenda is an outline of our policy positions for promoting essential components of Action Civics policy. These essential components include the prioritization of student-voice, project-based learning, civic knowledge, and targeted youth engagement with local government.

Furthermore, our nation is currently experiencing a civic engagement gap whereby individuals from lower-income communities and communities of color participate in government at lower rates than their higher income and white counterparts¹. Action Civics education can help to reduce this civic inequality by equipping students from disenfranchised communities with the tools to participate politically and, on a macro-level, paving a path to a more representative political process that can advance racial and socioeconomic equity in our society. As such, our policy and advocacy agenda places a focus on policies that prioritize closing the civic engagement gap by ensuring equitable implementation of Action Civics and providing targeted funding and resources for the implementation of Action Civics in underserved communities.

The policy and advocacy agenda is organized into two sections. The first section reviews GC's Action Civics policy and advocacy positions at the federal, state, and district levels. The second section describes our general principles and positions focused on promoting and building youth voice and youth civic engagement as a means to incentivize and emphasize Action Civics.

In accordance with our current strategic plan, GC has determined that state-level advocacy efforts present the best opportunity to create favorable conditions for the implementation of Action Civics. This state-level focus includes influencing state-level legislation, and working with State Departments of Education and other key players to create positive conditions for schools to engage in the practice. While policy change at all levels is necessary to create favorable conditions for Action Civics, we will focus our own advocacy efforts and resources primarily at the state-level.

FEDERAL, STATE, AND DISTRICT POLICY POSITIONS

FEDERAL POLICY

Federal education policy establishes key financial incentives, important learning objectives, and the overall legal framework in which states and districts operate. GC supports the following federal education policy reforms:

FULLY FUND THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION'S CIVICS GRANT PROGRAMS

PRESIDENTIAL AND CONGRESSIONAL ACADEMIES FOR AMERICAN HISTORY AND CIVICS ACADEMIES PROGRAM

- » The American History and Civics Academies grant program, administered by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Innovation and Improvement, supports Presidential and Congressional Academies for Teachers of American History and Civics in order to provide targeted support for both teachers and high school students in history and civics.
- » This program is currently funded at \$1.8 million, allocated between the two programs. For the forthcoming fiscal year, the combined funding levels should be \$3.6 million, including \$1.8 million for each program.

¹Gaby, Sarah. (2016). The Civic Engagement Gap(s): Youth Participation and Inequality from 1976 to 2009. Youth & Society.

AMERICAN HISTORY AND CIVICS-NATIONAL ACTIVITIES GRANTS

- » The American History and Civics Education—National Activities is a grant program which supports “programs that promote innovation in instruction, learning strategies, and professional development in American history, civics and government and government” focusing particularly on “low-income students and underserved populations.”
- » This grant is currently being funded at \$3 million. For the forthcoming fiscal year, it should be fully funded at the ESSA authorized amount of \$4.6 million.

STUDENT SUCCESS AND ACADEMIC ENRICHMENT GRANTS

- » The Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants allow school districts to apply for funding from the state for the purposes of a well-rounded education which can include civics education.
- » This grant is currently funded at \$1.17 billion. Funding in the forthcoming fiscal year should meet the ESSA authorized amount of \$1.6 billion.

FUND THE CORPORATION FOR NATIONAL AND COMMUNITY SERVICE

- » The Corporation for National and Community Service and its flagship initiative—the AmeriCorps programs—are pillars of America's nonprofit sector. AmeriCorps' various initiatives contribute talent and creativity to organizations across the country.
- » Generation Citizen has successfully worked with AmeriCorps VISTA corps members to increase organizational capacity in recent years. Current federal funding for The Corporation for National and Community Service is \$1.08 billion, representing a nearly \$19 million increase from FY18. Funding levels in the forthcoming fiscal year should meet and exceed the current year's levels. This funding would help both Generation Citizen, and the Action Civics field at large.

STATE POLICY

State-level education policy sets the foundational approach for curricular standards, holistic development and support of teachers, and the assessment of classroom practices. GC prioritizes our own work on state-level policies as the primary way to expand the equitable and sustainable implementation of Action Civics. We do so through advocating for states to focus on curriculum standards, funding, and assessments:

ESTABLISH CURRICULAR STANDARDS THAT PRIORITIZE CIVIC KNOWLEDGE AND CIVIC PARTICIPATION

- » A civics education course should be required in state law, standards and curriculum frameworks, particularly for middle and high school students. The content of this effective civics course may include: the rights and responsibilities of citizenship; opportunities for citizen participation in the various branches and levels of government; separation of powers; community diversity and historical trends in voter registration and civic participation relative to disenfranchised voter populations; and a working knowledge of intergovernmental affairs.
- » Standards must incentivize student-led inquiry and project-based learning. This includes students analyzing classroom-identified challenges, and engaging in problem-solving strategies. Students should be required to complete a student-led civics project (synonymous to an Action Civics project) in which they take political action towards lasting change on a real-world issue in their community. This project should consist of the following components: community examination, issue identification, research, strategizing, taking action, and reflection. All of these elements are foundational to an effective Action Civics education.
- » Civic learning should be integrated within all academic disciplines. A well-rounded education prioritizes civic learning across every academic discipline—from math and science to language arts and physical education.

CREATE A SUSTAINABLE CIVICS PROJECT FUND

- » States should establish a Civics Project Fund (potentially through a private-public partnership) to support educators in promoting and implementing effective civic learning and associated requirements. The Fund should be used to support teacher training and school implementation of effective Action Civics modules. This includes funding districts to support curriculum development and offer professional development, support for the implementation of student-led civics projects, the development of standardized assessment, and providing central capacity for standards, frameworks, and professional development. Funding allocation should be prioritized for school districts with high concentrations of underserved students.

IMPLEMENT STRONG CIVIC ASSESSMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY MEASURES TIED TO STANDARDS

- » Assessment of student progress toward civics education outcomes should be an essential part of state strategy to implement ESSA's definition of a "well-rounded education."
- » States should develop and implement effective assessment for student-led civics projects and incorporate results into student outcome metrics.
- » States should establish a process in which school districts can formally report out their implementation of Action Civics. State departments of education should establish criteria upon which school district plans are evaluated, and support should be provided to school districts whose plans fall below the threshold of success.

DISTRICT POLICY

District-level policy can provide principals and teachers with the support needed to institutionalize effective civic learning practices and environments within schools and classrooms. School districts can help ensure that that state and federal policies are effectively implemented. Additionally, innovation in civics education often takes place at the district level. GC's advocacy for Action Civics entails the following district-level priorities:

PRIORITIZE ACTION CIVICS IN SCHOOL DISTRICT MISSION STATEMENTS AND STRATEGIC PLANS

- » School districts should include and prioritize civic and/ or community readiness in the design of their strategic plans and their definitions of intended student outcomes. These priorities should identify Action Civics as a key strategy and be attached to student assessments, and accountability metrics. Where school district mission statements include a goal of civic or citizen preparation, school districts should include Action Civics as part of their activation of that goal.

PARTNER WITH COMMUNITY GROUPS AND ORGANIZATIONS TO SUPPORT ACTION CIVICS

- » School districts should engage with local community groups and organizations in order to successfully implement Action Civics. Such engagement includes public-private partnerships to fund professional development for teachers, opportunities for student voice in the implementation of Action Civics, resources to inform school leaders of potential classroom partnerships and the formation of a cross-sector coalition to institutionalize Action Civics in state-level legislation or administrative policy.

APPLY FOR SSAE GRANTS FROM STATE EDUCATION AGENCIES

- » School districts should apply for Student Support and Academic Enrichment (SSAE) grants from the state, as part of Title IV of ESSA. These funds can be used in three areas: 1) providing a well-rounded education (which includes civics), 2) using technology to support student learning, and 3) supporting student safety/health. School districts should apply for grants that include civics education as a way to prioritize a well-rounded education for students.

OFFER ROBUST TRAINING AND RESOURCES TO EDUCATORS FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF ACTION CIVICS

- » Professional development focused on Action Civics should be provided to all teachers in middle and high schools, with a focus on social studies educators. Minimally, professional development trainings should support teachers as civic educators to plan and implement effective student-led civics projects. In addition to training, school districts should provide teachers with resources, such as joint planning time, access to community partnerships, and proven curricula.

2018-19 GENERATION CITIZEN GENERAL ADVOCACY PRINCIPLES AND POSITIONS

PRINCIPLES

Generation Citizen, seeking to advance and build support for Action Civics education, is guided by several foundational principles. They will serve as the basis upon which we draft, and determine support for policies. Effective application of principles does require accounting for local context. Abiding by guiding principles, Generation Citizen seeks to promote:

- » EFFECTIVE, ACTION-BASED CIVICS EDUCATION FOR EVERY STUDENT IN THE COUNTRY;
- » IMPROVED STUDENT CRITICAL THINKING AND MEDIA LITERACY;
- » EXPANDED OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUTH TO DIRECTLY ACCESS AND INTERACT WITH ELECTED OFFICIALS;
- » PUBLIC FUNDING FOR YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN VOTER REGISTRATION, EDUCATION, AND OUTREACH;
- » ELEVATION OF YOUTH VOICE IN PUBLIC POLICY DECISION MAKING PROCESSES;
- » ENGAGEMENT OF YOUTH IN THE POLITICAL PROCESS BEFORE THEY TURN 18;
- » INTEGRATION OF PROJECT-BASED AND STUDENT-CENTERED TEACHING PRACTICES ACROSS SCHOOL CURRICULA;
- » EQUITABLE ACCESS TO A WELL-ROUNDED EDUCATION FOR STUDENTS OF ALL BACKGROUNDS AND FROM ALL COMMUNITIES;
- » DEMOCRATIC SCHOOL CULTURE ACROSS K-12 SCHOOLS IN WHICH ALL STUDENTS FEEL VALUED AND RESPECTED.

POSITION STATEMENTS

To further Generation Citizen's mission of bringing an Action Civics education to every student, we promote vehicles for effective youth preparation in civic engagement. As more young people participate in the political process, we believe that schools and communities will be more incentivized to promote Action Civics. We also believe the inverse is true: as students within a city and town receive an Action Civics education, more opportunities will be created for youth voice and student leadership become vital to further investing in their growth and development as engaged citizens. GC's position statements include a range of Action Civics aligned policy priorities.

The following policies are youth-oriented innovations for political participation. These activities can increase the immediate relevance of civics classes. Moreover, engaging students in these activities can lead schools to focus more attention on effective civics education, including Action Civics, as they will need to be prepared with civic skills and knowledge to effectively participate.

LOWER THE VOTING AGE TO 16 IN ELECTIONS

- » Lowering the voting age to 16 in elections helps young people establish the lifelong habit of voting by giving them the opportunity to vote in their first elections while they are still in secondary school. This policy also strengthens existing civics education classes and incentivizes schools to teach more and higher quality civics education.

CREATE YOUTH-ORIENTED BOARDS, COMMISSIONS, COUNCILS, AND SIMILAR BODIES

- » Youth participation in boards, commissions, councils, and similar bodies – whether comprised entirely or partly of youth, and where youth have power and influence over policy decisions – creates a unique and powerful opportunity for youth voice in government.

ESTABLISH AND EXPAND YOUTH-INCLUSIVE PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING

- » Participatory budgeting is a process in which residents decide how to allocate part of a public budget, and can be open to high-school or middle-school aged residents. Some participatory budgeting processes are even limited to only youth below a certain age. This allows concrete ways for young people to participate in governance.

EXPAND VOTER PRE-REGISTRATION TO YOUTH UNDER 18

- » When students can pre-register to vote before turning 18, schools are more likely to host voter registration drives. These registration efforts have been proven to increase youth voter turnout in states that have enacted it.

SUPPORT STRUCTURAL ENHANCEMENTS TO DEMOCRACY, AND OPPOSE THOSE THAT THREATEN DEMOCRATIC INTEGRITY AND PARTICIPATION

- » When barriers to civic and political participation exist, the voices of many youth and their families who have historically been excluded from community decision-making are not reflected by policymakers are not encouraged to participate long-term. Our democracy is stronger when everyone is incentivized and allowed to participate, and we advocate for reforms that point in this direction.

ESTABLISH STATE SEALS OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT FOR STUDENTS

- » State seals of civic engagement publicly recognize high school students for high levels of civic competence upon graduation. Incentivizing students to engage civically in this way requires that schools support students in doing so. To ensure equitable implementation of state seals, they must have inclusive criteria that prioritize student-led civics projects and out-of-school civic participation, and targeted funding that supports high-need districts.

ESTABLISH SCHOOL AND DISTRICT RECOGNITION PROGRAMS IN CIVICS

- » Public designation for civics education and civically engaged districts and/or schools recognizes high quality programs and student outcomes related to civics. This could include a tiered ranking system (excellent, average, or poor), or a requirement that all schools/ districts achieve a basic baseline and receive a civics distinction/ badge. Notably, accountability indicators might include consequences—potentially including improvement plans with timelines and action steps—for districts and schools whose practice diverges from accountability indicators.

PROGRAMMATIC DISTINCTIONS

Programmatic distinctions are school programs and pedagogies that create opportunities for and incentivize Action Civics by developing positive school culture, elevating youth voice and agency, and promoting inquiry and action. To advance our mission of bringing Action Civics to every student in the country, Generation Citizen supports the following interventions within education that create the contexts in which Action Civics can effectively be taught:

DEMOCRACY SCHOOLS

- » Democracy Schools are recognized for their commitment to civic learning and given financial support to execute on that commitment.

INTERDISCIPLINARY PROJECT-BASED LEARNING

- » Project-based learning is an approach to students whereby students gain both knowledge and skills by working, over a period of time, to investigate and respond to an authentic and engaging problem or question.

DEEPER LEARNING

- » Deeper learning is a pedagogy that promotes content mastery, effective communication, critical thinking and problem solving, collaboration, and self-directed learning for students.

SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING

- » Social emotional learning is the development of skills to manage emotions, demonstrate empathy, set and achieve goals, and create and sustain positive relationships.

THE COLLEGE, CAREER, AND CIVIC LIFE FRAMEWORK

- » The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework which provides guidance for state standards and social studies teaching practices, when adopted, strengthens social studies programs and support students' development of critical thinking, problem solving, and civic participation skills.

SCHOOL CLIMATE REFORM

- » Democratic learning environments are those in which students feel valued and respected. Establishing such environments -- through the use of peer mediators and non-punitive solutions for minor behavioral incidents - is a crucial step towards reversing harsh school disciplinary policies, which disproportionately affect students of color, and are correlated with decreased community engagement, voter turnout, and trust in government.

YOUTH ORGANIZING

- » Youth organizing is an extracurricular program in which young people are trained in community organizing and advocacy to institute meaningful social change.