



gc

**GENERATION CITIZEN**  
**CIVICS ADVOCATES IN THE STATES:**

How secretaries of state can be public  
champions of civics education

# Introduction

Americans need civics education. A recent Annenberg Public Policy Center survey<sup>1</sup> found that 20% of Americans cannot name a single branch of government, yet 97% have an opinion on whether or not they approve of Congress. Compounding the concern about insufficient civic knowledge is the fate of our American democracy itself. In a New York Times/Siena College poll from late 2022, 71% of all voters<sup>2</sup> said democracy was at risk - and only 7% said this was the most important problem facing the country. The survival and prosperity of our democracy depends, in large part, on an active and engaged citizenry.

The path towards realizing an inclusive, multi-racial democracy runs through young people. Evidence<sup>3</sup> has shown that K-12 civics education, which instills civic knowledge and skills in young people, is strongly related to their development as informed, active citizens. When comprehensive, experiential civic education is deeply supported, civic engagement is the outcome for rising, young leaders and their communities, and democracies are further positioned to survive, adapt, and thrive.

Much of the work toward improving civics education takes place inside the classroom, but that doesn't mean that government officials don't also play an extremely vital role. As we will explore in this policy brief, one state executive that can be a leader in promoting and expanding civic learning are secretaries of state. Secretaries of states can create a bridge between democracy education and democratic participation. With creative, consistent agency-level leadership, secretaries of state can take catalytic, nonpartisan steps to promote reflective, engaged citizenship.

## Executive Summary

47 states and Puerto Rico have secretaries of state<sup>4</sup>. Each secretary of state is different and has their own responsibilities involving

business filings, licensing, cybersecurity, and many others. Arguably the most important duty, however, is overseeing elections. The secretary of state is the chief election administrator in 40 states, and while the specific duty varies from state to state, this typically involves supervising the administration of election laws, reviewing statewide initiative and referendum petitions, investigating election fraud and irregularities, and maintaining election statistics and other election-related records.

Most state secretaries of state are not household names, yet they are some of the most important people in the country when it comes to protecting and cultivating our democracy. Their role as arbiters of elections makes them uniquely suited to be powerful advocates for civics education.

Secretaries of State can and should be involved in promoting civics education through public policy and through utilizing their platform as state elected officials to promote civic engagement to young people.

One policy initiative that enhances civic engagement at the K-12 level is a civics seal program. Civic seals, often also referred to as civics diploma seals, are awards given to students that signify their competency in civic knowledge, responsibility, values, and engagement<sup>5</sup>. Secretaries of state can take an active role in promoting civic engagement by collaborating with in-state partners on a civic seal program, with legislatures as an optional partner, while preserving conventional norms like program transparency and collaborating with natural allies, like students, school districts, and similar stakeholders.

One policy initiative that enhances civic engagement at the K-12 level is a civics seal program. Civic seals, often also referred to as civics diploma seals, are awards given to students that signify their competency in civic knowledge, responsibility, values, and engagement. Secretaries of state can take an active role in promoting civic engagement by collaborating with in-state partners on a civic seal program,

with legislatures as an optional partner, while preserving conventional norms like program transparency and collaborating with natural allies, like students, school districts, and similar stakeholders.

Eight states have implemented some form of a civic seal program, many of which were created through the executive branch of state government, not the legislative branch. While civic seal programs are not a perfect solution for expanding student access to civics education, they present an opportunity for secretaries of state to take an active role in creating a more informed and civically engaged electorate. This brief will detail civic seal programs in states that have implemented them, and provide a case study of a recent example where Kentucky's secretary of state collaborated with civics advocates to start a civics seal pilot program, slated to begin this year.

Secretaries of State should also be utilizing the experience of their office to educate young people on civics and the importance of participating in our democracy. While each state is different, all have a vested interest in promoting civic participation - particularly at a young age. This brief will provide examples of secretaries of state who have leveraged the platform and expertise of their office to connect with youth directly and implement programs that have expanded access to civic knowledge and encouraged youth civic engagement.

## **Contextualizing Secretaries of State**

Elections are the most fundamental part of our democracy in the United States and therefore are of the utmost importance to the survival of our republic. After decades<sup>6</sup> of declining confidence in public institutions, across administrations, the 2020 election and subsequent aftermath proved to be a powerful stress test to the public trust in our elections and ultimately the vitality of our democracy. The efforts to protect and safeguard the sanctity of the election process in Georgia by their secretary of state, Brad

Raffensperger, demonstrated just how impactful the position truly is.

Since 2020, state secretaries of state have moved from relative obscurity into the national spotlight. Secretaries of state are the bulwark protecting elections from those seeking to undermine them and while their roles have always been important, they have seen renewed importance since 2020 as stewards of our democracy across traditional cleavages of age, party affiliation, region, and so on.

As alluded to earlier, secretaries of state oversee the most fundamental part of the democratic process in most states, making the position uniquely qualified to lead on civics education. An active, informed, and civically engaged public is vital for realizing an inclusive, multiracial democracy, so secretaries of state have a vested interest in taking an active role in promoting civics education.

## **An Overview of Civic Diploma Seals**

Access to comprehensive, experiential civics education is one of the best ways to ensure that we are investing in our democracy and protecting it for generations to come. There are many methods for promoting holistic civics education in states, and one of those ways is through the establishment and implementation of a civics seal program.

State legislatures are often where we look to craft policy that promotes and expands access to civics education across the country. While it is often the case that much can be accomplished legislatively to do this, it's not the only tool in the civics education policy toolbox. In recent years, several states have been turning to the executive branch of state governments — such as state boards or departments of education, among other agencies — and implementing what is known as a civic seal program.



## **WHAT IS A CIVIC SEAL AND WHY ARE THEY USED?**

Diploma seals are fixed onto high school diplomas indicating that the student has attained a high level of proficiency in a given subject area. School districts in many states offer a multitude of different diploma seal programs to showcase important areas of study, such as civic seals of biliteracy. These seals are an incentive for students to participate in the more rigorous challenges required to earn those diploma seals.

Civic seals are a particular type of diploma seal awarded to students to signify their competency in civic knowledge, responsibility, values, and engagement. A civics seal is often viewed as an incentive for students because it is an indication to colleges and potential employers that the student has achieved a high level of proficiency in civics.

Civic seal programs are also a great option for supporters of civics education who want to promote and enhance the quality of civics in their respective state in ways that can activate executive branch, agency-level leadership.

# States who have implemented civic seal programs<sup>7</sup>

State	Details	Year Implemented
Arizona	<p>Arizona Seal of Civic Literacy</p> <p>The Arizona Seal of Civics Literacy program recognizes high school students who achieve a high level of proficiency in Civics. To earn the seal of civic literacy, students must:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Complete all required social studies courses with at least a 3.0 GPA</li> <li>Pass the Arizona Civics Exam</li> <li>Complete activities in the four designated civic categories (Civic Learning Programs, Civic Engagement Activities, Service Learning/Community Service Activities, and Written Reflections)</li> </ul>	2019-20 school year
California	<p>California State Seal of Civic Engagement</p> <p>Awards the State Seal of Civic Engagement (SSCE) to California students who:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Are engaged in academic work in a productive way;</li> <li>Demonstrate a competent understanding of U.S. and California constitutions; functions and governance of local governments; tribal government structures and organizations; the role of the citizen in a constitutional democracy; and democratic principles, concepts, and processes;</li> <li>Participate in one or more informed civic engagement project(s) that address real-world problems and require students to identify and inquire into civic needs or problems, consider varied responses, take action, and reflect on efforts;</li> <li>Demonstrate civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions through self-reflection; and</li> <li>Exhibit character traits that reflect civic-mindedness and a commitment to positively impact the classroom, school, community, and/or society.</li> </ul>	2020-21 school year
Georgia	<p>Georgia Civic Engagement Diploma Seal Requirements</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Meet state social studies course requirements</li> <li>Pass an American government basic skills test</li> <li>Complete 50 hours of voluntary participation in community service or extracurricular activities during the student's high school career</li> <li>Capstone project</li> </ul>	2018-19 school year

Kentucky	Commonwealth Civic Seal Program Civic engagement project Knowledge and applied understanding of different levels of government (local, state, national) and democratic principles. Demonstrate democratic patriotism Digital citizenship Self-reflection	TBD
----------	---	-----

## Case Studies

### Case Study: Kentucky Civics Seal Pilot Program

The desire for high-quality civics education is a non-partisan issue, and Kentucky is a compelling example of this. While our other case studies have taken place in states where the Democratic Party dominates state and federal elections, the opposite is true in Kentucky.

Kentucky’s Republican Secretary of State, Michael G. Adams, has been a leader in championing the need for civics education, especially in recent years, and served as a champion of Kentucky’s civics seal pilot program. Secretary Adams cited<sup>8</sup> the growing polarity within government and the electorate and the need for people to engage more in civic and political life as two rationales for needing high-quality civics education.

Kentucky has required high school students (grades 9 through 12) to pass a civics assessment in order to graduate since 2018. However, Secretary Adams and advocates from the Kentucky Civic Education Coalition believed that students needed more than just an assessment. They partnered together to create a civic seal pilot program to help reinvigorate civics education in the commonwealth, leading to the creation of the Commonwealth Civic Seal program.

The Commonwealth Civic Seal program (CCS) would recognize Kentucky students at all levels

who demonstrate exceptional civic performance through exhibiting democratic patriotism in their understanding and application of foundational state and national governance, democratic principles, and informed participation in civic spaces.

A big part of what distinguishes this approach is the level of engagement on behalf of Secretary Adams, particularly his front-facing approach to media engagement surrounding the launch of the pilot program. More secretaries of state should model this approach to promote civics.

### Case Study: Rhode Island

Though Rhode Island does not have a civic seal program, the secretary of state has historically been an impactful public champion for civics. The current secretary of state, Greg Amore, has been a powerful advocate for civics education since his time in the legislature. Secretary Amore’s predecessor took a very active role in promoting civics education while in office.

During her two terms, Secretary of State Nellie Gorbea<sup>9</sup> focused heavily on policies and programs that would bolster civic engagement and participation and worked to create a more informed electorate, particularly for young people in Rhode Island

### Resources

A large part of Secretary Gorbea’s work involved creating greater access to resources so students - and the public as a whole - could learn

more about the history of Rhode Island and be more informed and engaged citizens.

Upon taking office, she created a full-time equivalent position, Associate Director of Education and Public Programs, to manage existing programs with history and civics and identify new opportunities to develop these programs and teaching materials<sup>10</sup>.

Secretary Gorbea also worked to launch<sup>11</sup> online resources for teachers that allowed students to - for the first time - have access to original documents from the Rhode Island State Archives. The resources included eight different collections pertaining to Rhode Island's history and consisted of primary source documents that educators could use for classroom instruction, and that students could access from anywhere.

Secretary Gorbea also created the Open Government Center<sup>12</sup>, an online tool with the goal of improving transparency and accessibility of public data and government information. The Open Government Center gives the public access to resources that help them participate in civic engagement activities and hold the government accountable.

## Civic Learning Week

Civic Learning Week, convened by CivXNow showcases<sup>13</sup> best practices in civic learning by highlighting the civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions gained by students in the classroom. That civic learning experience serves as the foundation for an informed and engaged populace in order to prioritize civic learning in the state. Secretary Gorbea served as a key event sponsor and champion of Rhode Island's inaugural civic learning week in 2022 which featured 16 workshops led by organizations, youth, and leaders in civic education, and gave opening remarks to kick off the event. Not only was this a catalytic event to promote civics education, but it also elevated student and teacher voices as experts in the field.

Secretary Gorbea's actions while in office

helped to shape and expand civics education in a way that cultivated a more informed and engaged citizenry which will ultimately benefit the state's democratic process.

## Case Study: Minnesota

Minnesota Secretary of State Steve Simon has been in his current office since 2015, and has spent a large part of that time focused on voting and civic engagement. While Secretary Simon has maintained a relatively low public profile during his over eight years in office, he has spent his tenure making important strides to promote civic education and engagement by being present in the classroom.

On multiple occasions, Secretary Simon has visited classrooms throughout the state — effectively conducting a listening tour — to answer questions about the electoral process and encourage students to vote and become civically engaged in their community. One way he has used the policy arm of his office to do this is through the creation of the “Your Vote Matters” program.

## Your Vote Matters Program

In 2015, Secretary Simon launched “Your Vote Matters”, a program designed to help civics teachers with voter education for their students. The components of the program include:

- A classroom visit from Secretary Simon
- A new instructional unit on voting in Minnesota for grades 9-12
- Support and guidance for running school registration drives
- Materials to teach students about the Minnesota Voting Rights Act
- Free Minnesota Blue Book legislative manuals for classroom use
- Information on how students can become election judge trainees

This program seeks to enhance access to resources that teachers can use to teach civics more effectively and implements an important hands-on approach that encourages students to

go beyond the classroom setting and become more civically engaged.

## Students Voting Mock Election

Secretaries of state aren't classroom teachers, but they do have the resources and powers of their office that can be put to uniquely helpful use to promote civics education.

Similar to Secretary Gorbea's efforts to bring voting machines into schools, Secretary Simon has championed a statewide mock election program to help students understand the importance of voting as a tool for civic engagement.

The Students Voting Statewide Mock Election program was started in 2016 and provides an outlet for teachers and students to experiment with learning about voting. Participating schools receive printable customized election ballots similar to the real thing, tabletop voting booths, ballot boxes, lesson plans, and even "I voted" stickers in order to authentically simulate the

## Recommendations

### Recommendation 1: Secretaries of state should champion civic seal initiatives

SOSs should be champions of civics seals as a way to bolster the quality of civic education in their states in support of democracy. It is clear now more than ever that protecting the sanctity of our American democracy needs to be a top priority for every elected official in this country, but especially secretaries of state.

An informed and civically engaged electorate is necessary for democracy to survive and flourish, and there is no better way to accomplish that than through high-quality, comprehensive civics education.

Secretaries of state are not legislators, and thus they cannot create new laws or change existing ones to tailor educational curricula. However, as we have seen in Kentucky, they can serve a unique role in cultivating and promoting civic seal programs in their respective states.

### Recommendation 2: Secretaries of state should make efforts to ensure a more open government by promoting policies that increase access to civic learning material

Civics education is key to a healthy democracy, and engaging young people in the process is an important part of that. As Secretary Gorbea in Rhode Island demonstrated, secretaries of state can take a leading role in highlighting civic knowledge and promoting civic learning by partnering on a civic learning week - community collaboration is one of the best ways to promote civic engagement.

As demonstrated in Minnesota, taking a hands-on approach to promoting civics education is something every secretary of state is equipped to do. Leveraging the resources of the office through programs like "Your Vote Matters" have helped students gain access to valuable educational material in a unique way while also showing investment in civics education by important state officials.

### Recommendation 3: Secretaries of State should be public champions of civics education in their state

Secretaries of state have a unique domain over civic engagement in their state, but they don't need to wait until there is an election to visibly and vocally support that work. SOSs should take a larger role in publicly articulating the benefits of civics education at-large as a key tool to promote lifelong civic engagement and community investment. Utilizing earned media is a powerful tool for educating the public on important issues.

Secretary Adams in Kentucky has been incredibly effective at using earned media as a messaging tool about the importance of civics education for imparting democratic values on a new generation of citizens, and emphasizing the urgency<sup>14</sup> of it in today's society.

The public needs to know that their government, not just their children's teachers, are



invested in the importance of civic education and civic knowledge.

## **CLOSING**

The United States is a powerful experiment in democracy that, while imperfect, holds the potential to lift up all voices from all backgrounds. However, our impactful democracy is also fragile and not immune to challenges from those who seek to undermine it. Civics education is one of the most important tools to ensure that our democracy can survive these challenges. Secretaries of state hold a unique position of authority to not only protect our democracy in the present, but also to help future generations and current, rising leaders access the civic learning needed to do so themselves.

# ENDNOTES

1. <https://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/2021-annenberg-constitution-day-civics-survey/>
2. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/18/us/politics/midterm-election-voters-democracy-poll.html>
3. <https://civxnow.org/sites/default/files/resources/SummitWhitePaper.pdf>
4. Alaska, Hawaii, and Utah are the three exceptions. The lieutenant governors in those states typically assume the responsibilities of a secretary of state.
5. See “Civics Diploma Seals: Energizing Civic Engagement for Students” by the National Council for Social Studies <https://www.socialstudies.org/system/files/2022-06/SE-860322209.pdf>
6. See Pew Research Study: Public Trust in Government: 1958-2022 <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2022/06/06/public-trust-in-government-1958-2022/>
7. The table on seals is informed by, and adapted from, “Social Studies Civics Diploma Seals: Energizing Civic Engagement for Students” by the National Council for Social Studies <https://www.socialstudies.org/system/files/2022-06/SE-860322209.pdf>.
8. <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/opinion-im-a-state-election-chief-we-need-to-do-something-about-civics-education/2022/11>
9. Gorbea served as Rhode Island Secretary of State from January 6, 2015 to January 3, 2023/
10. <https://www.nass.org/sites/default/files/awards/RI-IDEAS-Award-2019.pdf>
11. <https://www.wpri.com/community/sec-nellie-gorbea-unveils-online-teacher-resources/>
12. <https://myemail.constantcontact.com/New-Open-Government-Center-and-Improved-Transparency-Tools.html?soid=1102655398874&aid=aJasuDQHlVA>
13. <https://www.ricivics.org/civicsweek2022>
14. [https://www.richmondregister.com/opinion/civic-deserts-growing-more-common-in-america/article\\_306acfac-7b29-11ed-9259-4755c2e85333.html](https://www.richmondregister.com/opinion/civic-deserts-growing-more-common-in-america/article_306acfac-7b29-11ed-9259-4755c2e85333.html)